WOMEN'S WRITING FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA: NARRATIVES OF INDIGENEITY, ETHNICITIES AND AESTHETICS

Ph.D. Thesis

By

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DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY INDORE

AUGUST 2017

WOMEN'S WRITING FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA: NARRATIVES OF INDIGENEITY, ETHNICITIES AND AESTHETICS

A THESIS

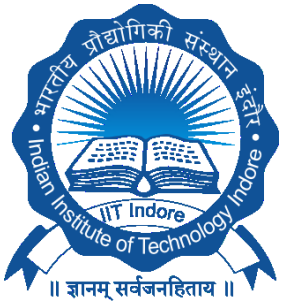
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

I WATITULA LONGKUMER



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AUGUST 2017

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CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **WOMEN'S WRITING FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA: NARRATIVES OF INDIGENEITY, ETHNICITIES AND AESTHETICS** in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** and submitted in the **DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH, Indian Institute of Technology Indore**, is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the time period from July 2013 to August 2017 under the supervision of Dr. Nirmala Menon, Associate Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Indore.

The matter presented in this thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.

Signature of the student with date
(I WATITULA LONGKUMER)

This is to certify that the above statement made by the candidate is correct to the best of my knowledge.

Signature of Thesis Supervisor with date

(DR. NIRMALA MENON)

I WATITULA LONGKUMER has successfully given her Ph.D. Oral Examination held on **2nd February 2018**.

Signature of Chairperson (OEB) Date:	Signature of External Examiner Date:	Signature of Thesis Supervisor Date:
Signature of PSPC Member #1 Date:	Signature of PSPC Member #2 Date:	Signature of PSPC Member #3 Date:
Signature of Head of Discipline Date:		Signature of Convener, DPGC Date:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank God Almighty for giving me the wisdom, guidance and understanding to carry out and complete the most significant learning experience of my academic journey with perseverance, zeal and patience.

I am so grateful for the love and support of my family. Their unequivocal love and support throughout my doctoral journey have been the most wonderful experience I will cherish forever. This thesis is an outcome of their constant encouragement and prayers.

I sincerely thank and acknowledge the fine supervision, skill, wisdom and patience of Professor Nirmala Menon. I am grateful for her attention to the smallest detail of my thesis and ensuring the sheer perfection of a doctoral thesis. As challenging as the topic has been for me, she was called on to be inventive to help me chart out the lesser-known territory of North-East India literature and bring it into academic discourse. I appreciate the time she spent in deep thought about my work. Thank you Prof. Menon for constantly encouraging and motivating me to work with honesty, sincerity and dedication. I am deeply excited to carry forward your teaching as I look forward, if God willing, to a bright future.

I would like to thank my PSPC committee members, Professors Amarjeet Nayak, Neeraj Mishra, Sanjram Premjit K for their invaluable help and insights. I wish to thank the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Indore for appreciating the value of my work by financially assisting me to attend national and international conferences and to carry out a wonderful summer project on Gulabi Gang at Uttar Pradesh, India. I am grateful to Prof. Bharath Kumar for financially supporting me, during his tenure as the Head of School, to carry out an extensive library visit in the states of North-East India for collection of research data and materials which immensely shaped the strength of this thesis.

I am thankful to all the fellow colleagues and Professors I met during conferences and workshops whose suggestions and insights have helped me think more deeply about my research. I wish to particularly mention Easterine Kire for giving me the time and opportunity to interview her. The invaluable knowledge and information shared during our conversation has been so helpful in giving me the confidence to bring the thesis to an end. The interview, appended in the thesis, is an immense contribution to the scholarship of North-East India literature. I extend my sincere thanks to the library staffs at North-Eastern Hill University, North-East Council Library, Indian Council of Social Science Research Library Shillong Campus and Kohima State Library for assisting me with research materials and generously allowing me to access all the sections of the library.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my fellow colleagues Reema, Ashna, Priya and Shaifali from whom I have learnt a lot. Mel, you are an added blessing. Thank you for sharing a healthy research environment. I particularly wish to thank Priya for the massive help she readily extended in helping me compile my thesis and importantly, for helping me plot the network analysis. I am so grateful for her resilient support, patience and company. Thank you Priya!

Last but not the least, a huge thanks goes to all the faculties and fellow scholars at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Indore.

And finally, to each and every person I met at IIT Indore who extended help in ways I cannot measure and made my stay at Indore a pleasant experience, thank you.

I WATI LONGKUMER

In dedication to my most loving

Dad, Mom, Shapong, Susang & Tinu

for supporting me all the way!

SYNOPSIS

Introduction

India is listed as a country with one of the largest populations of indigenous peoples in the world. The largest concentration of indigenous peoples are found in the eight states of North-East India and the 'central tribal belt' stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal. North-East India, considered as one of the most culturally diverse regions' of the world, is a land with a high concentration of tribal population. The region shares geographical borders with four countries - China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Bhutan of Asia. In physical and geographical terms, only four percent of the region is contiguous with India whereas the remaining ninety six percent of the North-East borders the other countries.

The significant cultural resource of the individual states, defined through the rich cultural heritage preserved in the form of oral traditions and artifacts has a huge influence on literary works of the region. Literature from the North-East incorporates an expansive thematic range that covers a large number of engaging themes on borders, boundaries, identity, location of home and culture and the oral tradition. The themes are often indigenous in nature that extensively and often exclusively discusses community-specific indigenous knowledge and ethics. However, these thematic features are reflected in the following ways: 1) the popular and media-driven narratives that exclusively focus on the region's political conflict and unrest and, importantly for my thesis, 2) the spillover of these narratives that directly and indirectly affect the scholarship of the literary works. Hence, the literary works produced from the region get defined on two problematic premises, 1) of the region's political implications and 2) the wide spectrum of a particular ethnological narrative. In this thesis, I argue that while both of these are important elements, they are disproportionately

represented in the discourse of North-East literature to the exclusion of other aesthetics and literary parameters. The thesis recognizes and tries to locate a literary gap through a critical examination of aesthetic questions that are important and has not been addressed in the scholarship of North-East literature.

Narrative analysis plays an important role, especially, for indigenous literary texts that are embedded with multiple and complex interpretations of its varied cultural world. Narrative analysis moves much beyond its definition of the conversations of lived experiences or events of an individual or his / her community. It is a comprehensive concept that invites cross-counter dialogues on narratives that, 1) identifies the rightful authentic voice of an individual / communities 2) constructs a comfortable linguistic space for articulating minor history and 3) offers a certain amount of flexibility to re-interpret narratives through thoughtful understanding of the context and premise from which it is written. The thesis identifies the significance of narrative study and situates it within Homi Bhabha's definition to the idea of 'literary self-determination' that is interlaced with how I use and define the term narrative. I relate to Bhabha's idea of protecting the 'right to narrate' by examining the narrative challenges that confronts writers from the North-East India in terms of, 1) linguistic representation and 2) drawing the oral history of indigenous communities. The chapters of my thesis underlines the need for such narrative representation by establishing a ground for attainment of a "right to address and be addressed, to signify and be interpreted, to speak and be heard, to make a sign and to know that it will receive respectful attention" (Bhabha 2014) and to develop a vocabulary of literary dialogue that reframes and redefines the indigenous aesthetics in the narrative of the region's literature.

Research Gaps

Scholars and writers such as Easterine Kire, Anjum Hasan, Mitra Phukan, Tilottoma Misra and Preeti Gill have recognized the peripherality of the North-East vis-à-vis mainstream Indian literature in their scholarship. Similarly, various literary publishing houses such as Zubaan, Kali for Women, Penguin, Harper Collins, Random House India, Speaking Tiger and SAGE series titled SAGE Studies on India's North East endeavors to bring the literary works to a larger audience. This recognition is certainly a welcome change from the almost complete erasure of the literary voices from the North East in the past. However, as we sift through this as yet nascent body of work, a few patterns clearly emerge in the scholarly discourse of these works, 1) an over-emphases on the conflict-ridden political discourse and 2) disproportionate focus on anthropological research that often conflates the diverse ethnicities of the eight individual states that make up the North-East. Even as the works of scholars and writers help in determining the literary identity by submitting to well-researched secondary materials the explication of these works in terms of understanding the narrative aesthetics are still very few. Some examples being the following:

1) Recent available scholarship on North-East literature shows a very focused and exclusive study that only textually summarizes the fictional works against common narratives of political conflict and violence

2) Scholarly articles shows that the oral indigenous aesthetics (of spiritual geography, the myths, legends and the indigenous societal values and cultures) are often erased for a dominant narrative of violence and unrest that characterize the image of this region

3) The studies carried out so far on the literary works show a very rigid narrative structure of an otherwise diverse theme with a lack of a cohesive conversation that applies current theories to address

problems of recognition, sensibilities and political aspirations of the indigenous communities.

Various intercultural studies and comparative studies in terms of understanding the cultural beliefs and practices are useful materials. Works such as "Culture as Reflected in Achebe's Works and Ao Naga Literature" by Sentinaro, *Folk Elements in Achebe* (2000) by Easterine Kire that studies the cultural affinity between *Tenyimia* (a tribal community of the Naga's that comprises of ten tribes) and Igbo underline some intersection between indigenous studies across the globe. Such studies contribute to existing scholarship of North-East literature. However, the purpose of this thesis is to locate the concept of literary aesthetics within the framework of North-East literary that deploys certain unique narrative tropes.

The challenge while working with indigenous texts is that there is little or no theoretical vocabulary that captures the specific ways of distinctiveness of indigenous narratives. I see such a problem in aboriginal literature too where writers use race theory but are constrained in that it also narrates a colonial power relation toward colonized texts that are twice subjugated due to their marginalization at both levels. This absence results in an erasure of such writings / texts as it does not fit into theories constructed and defined by the 'other'. Hence, aboriginal writers elaborate the need for creation of a new literary framework that enables discussion from the indigenous cultural context. This problem is carried forward in my thesis through a critical examination of aesthetic questions that will enable us to reduce our collective ignorance about the communities generally described as 'indigenous' and to understand these narratives in more complex ways than its exoticism or otherness as just an expression of diversity.

Research Questions

The thesis makes an important enquiry to the notion of literature studies in terms of literary expectations (themes, motifs, linguistic expressions etc.) and its role of creating, which to a large extent is a demand of a narrative of national prototype. As the literary works I engage with contains ethnic / indigenous aesthetics that does not always align with narratives of mainstream Indian literature there is a tendency to view these texts from a familiar trope which I argue results, at best, an incomplete reading and at worst, a misreading of these texts. This practice of perfecting the 'other' towards a 'standard' approach leads to an over-simplification of a disparate body of work. The demand towards a narrative of national prototype poses several interlinked questions that are addressed in the thesis. My research questions are: 1) What are the kinds of narratives that should be included for a literary genre? 2) How do we define the narrative with respect to literature from the North-East since it does not adhere to the standard narrative of mainstream Indian literature 3) How do we develop an aesthetic framework for situating or contextualizing the indigenous narratives 4) How does cultural identity and traditional aesthetic function in the fictional works of North-East? These complex issues and questions are considered in my thesis to allow readers in understanding how the dynamics of culture, society and identity of the tribal community are part of the narrative framework for its literary works.

Framework and Methodology

As an emerging field of study that has, in the recent years, grasped the attention of readers, scholars and critics, this thesis undertakes various approaches in an attempt to arrive at a nuanced understanding of the distinct literary landscape. The research method is primarily based on qualitative analysis, however some

quantitative analysis is conducted to corroborate the findings of the thesis by using digital tools and network visualization.

Primary source

The primary source of this thesis includes eight select texts of contemporary women writers from the North-East. The texts includes, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006), *The Black Hill* (2014), Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti* (2009), *Difficult Pleasures* (2013), and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2013). These eight texts are originally written and published in English.

Secondary source

The secondary source includes research materials of scholarly articles related to the topic of research, administrative records and data collected from various institutions and state as well as centrally sponsored libraries. To assist my research objectives and observations and to provide relevant and current research I conducted an interview with Easterine Kire on 26th December 2016 at Kohima, Nagaland. As a writer and a scholar from the North-East her inputs were crucial to understand my research questions. Due to the lack of adequate research materials on North-East literature, the secondary source relied on other indigenous theory such as Native American and Aboriginal to understand the aesthetics of oral narratives. Besides this, the thesis also studies and incorporates African-American writers' and their conflicts with mainstream American literature perspectives to understand similar conflicts in North-East literature. These references do not seek to make a comparative study with the Native American or the African-American literature even though there maybe similarities in terms of history and cultural practices; however, my work seeks to analyze the quest of 'identity politics' and locating 'roots' for these communities.

Research methods

I. Qualitative methods

To counter the enduring dominant narrative of mainstream literature about indigenous or the ethnic literary voices, this thesis is framed by minor literary theory and voice and by challenging the concept of canon in postcolonial studies, in the context of Indian English literature. Primarily a qualitative study, the thesis undertakes a comprehensive textual analysis and therefore is a study informed by narrative inquiry. Only a handful of research studies have been carried out in the literary works produced from the North-East, so the academic voice is yet to find a suitable theoretical measure to study the varied narrative as well as thematic dimension of the literary works. However, indigenous studies across the world have arrived at a more nuanced understanding of enabling communities to reclaim and tell their stories in their own ways (Battiste). Narrative studies in contemporary research are presently acknowledged as powerful agents for resistance and change as it connects the past to the future (Archibald 2008; Smith 1999). Such act of resistance is relevant in my thesis, as I observe the writers' challenge towards a resistance to language and in forming literary self-determination. Professor Martin Nakata in his book *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (2007) asserts that the Indigenist thesis must resist a prescribed academic space as he encourages the dualistic role of being trained within the Western tradition as researchers but representing the standpoint of indigenous people.

The methodology of this thesis depends on the basis of the authors' narrative juxtapositioning of history and imagination in the fictional works as well as the published and unpublished oral narratives of the communities' history. The thesis is a chronological narrative as the authors who take on the role of storytellers speak across experiences of history, traditional beliefs

and culture and political anxiety. The study that collectively collates writers from the eight states in one thesis poses an obvious problem, of being unmanageable and scattered. It also brings a danger of creating fixed labels that raises questions on whether the description of a specific cultural activity can or should be conclusively accepted to associate the known distinct practices of each community. Therefore, to undertake this collective study on select works of fiction by writers from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland, I specifically choose some key points within a fixed timeframe that coincides with a period of massive change in the literary landscape of Indian Writings in English. I look at select works written between the periods of 2006 to 2014 to help examine and understand how these writers interpret the social, cultural, and political history, and define narratives of orality, indigenous lifestyle, violence, conflict, that are not just predominant characteristics to the literary works, but are significant narratives that defines their experiences. The specified periods also reflect an important phase of change in the Indian literary world where the existent literature known for its complexity and depth, reflecting the diversity of the nation, adds up with the emerging writers 'new narrative voices' that retraces the boundaries of Indian literature. This phase of change brings about startling narratives that welcomes open conversations and 're'- defines, examines, interprets topics and concepts on the nature and idea of home, cultural assimilation, individuals relation to their culture and tradition, all of it taking place in the rapid force of globalisation.

The thesis consciously focuses on women writers from the North-East for some of the following reasons:

1) While the male writers from the region similarly contribute to the narratives of the region's political disorder there is a holistic contribution in the literary works of the women writers from the region whose writings move much beyond narratives of victimhood

in terms of how they incorporate a contemporary ethnic narrative voice to their works

2) Male writers such as Siddhartha Deb, Dhruba Hazarika, Aruni Kashyap, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih have contributed widely in poetry and fiction and their works reflects the region's political episodes of conflict and violence. Desmond Kharmawphlang understanding the dominant thread that colors much of the literature from the North-East coined the term 'Terror lore', that explains the literary work of the region (poetry/fiction) emerging from societies besieged by collective fear and insecurity. While their negotiation with the political narrative, as a thematic feature, in the literary works is important their writings are still yet to explore the narratives of spiritual geography that women writers such as Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai and Janice Pariat engages with in their works such as *When the River Sleeps, The Black Hill* and *Boats on Land*

3) In the engagement of the region's debated atmosphere on its several acts of secessionism and seditious streams toward sovereignty, the narrative engagement is different in terms of men and women writers

4) Quantitatively, there is a consistent rise of the women writers' contribution to the literary production as compared to their male counterparts.

My approach to women writers is, 1) to explore their narrative expression in interpreting the concepts of indigenous literary tradition, the aesthetic framework of those traditions, the communities' mythologies and histories, artistic practices and the politics and ideologies in the fictional space and 2) to place emphasis on the understanding that the women writers' engagement on topics of indigenous politics is to put forward a form of self-representation and to assert their literary identity by way of writing themselves into authorship.

In framing the structure of the thesis, I perceive that the indigenous research is yet an undefined entity at present. However, in analyzing the narrative of these texts, I have observed the rich counter-narrative that the writers across the world are beginning to bring into the academy. Presently, there are emerging books of indigenous studies such as *Indigeneity: Culture and Representation* (2009) by G. N. Devy, Geoffrey V. Davis that consists of various essays on indigenous languages, culture and society, *Emerging Literature from North-East India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity* (2013) by Margaret Ch. Zama and even books of indigenous methodologies such as *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (2011) by the South American Indigenous academic Bagele Chilisa. In my research duration of gathering secondary materials from some states of the North-East, I undertook the opportunity of consulting various scholars and community elders for cultural materials that are yet to be archived and hence are only orally disseminated till date. Even as the thesis relies on some aspects of western theories by design, my point of difference in terms of accommodating mainstream theories and idea results from the indigenous worldview of the community I belong to.

II. Quantitative methods

The quantitative analysis is carried out in two samples:

a) In the first quantitative research the digital narrative uses Voyant for creating a word cloud and Gephi for creating a network visualization. The data includes three works of fiction from the thesis primary source, Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill* and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and scholarly articles. To identify the scholarly articles, the first attempt was to source materials from databases, available at IIT Indore library, such as JSTOR, MLA International Bibliography, Google Scholar and Literature Online. However, these databases could not source materials that had specific focus on the fictional works of

the North-East. Therefore, the next attempt was to use Google by entering a variety of different search terms on Google web search. Some of the keywords used were, “articles on narrative representation in north-east India literature”, “society culture on works of fiction of North-East India”, “narrative perspective and reflection of history culture society of north-east India literature”, “Narrative of social realities in north-east India literature” and “articles on Temsula Ao literary works north-east India”. The application of these keywords generated ten scholarly articles based on works of fiction (which underscores my earlier point about the paucity of scholarship of North-East literature).

Due to the unavailability of the soft copies of the three fictional works, the entries were done manually following which the individual documents were imported in Voyant tools to extract keywords. The generated keywords were then typed into an excel sheet in order to convert the file to CSV format. For the scholarly articles, the available PDF files were imported in Voyant for obtaining keywords, after which the same steps were followed as mentioned above. The CSV files (the three fictional works and ten scholarly articles) were then imported into Gephi to perform the final network visualization. This analysis shows how these texts that are an illustration of oral literary aesthetics are absent from the scholarly conversation of North-East literature and the aesthetics they represent are often erased for a more dominant narrative of violence and unrest that characterize the image of this region.

b) In the next quantitative analysis, a relatively simple graphical representation of scholarly articles on North-East literature is performed by extracting data from two databases that are most accessed by literature scholars, JSTOR and ProQuest. Under ProQuest, I generated data from MLA International Bibliography, Literature Online and Dissertation & Theses. For the analysis I looked at the scholarship of five contemporary women writers from the North-East namely, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan,

Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Mitra Phukan. The graph is created using a random search by applying individual names of authors as keywords in the search engine of the database. I did not use any time period and have instead used percentage for studying the number of works available, as seen in the vertical (value) axis in Figure 1.a and Figure 2.b. This analysis is performed first, to give a visual analysis on the materials that are present at the academic platform for scholars second, to understand the literary representation and production of the scholarship of North-East literature and hence to provide a result that shows the need to accelerate the growth of regional literature at the academic platform.

Chapterisation

The thesis with an introduction and a conclusion contains three core chapters and an interview with Easterine Kire. Each chapters of the thesis includes sub-sections that closely studies some key concepts of the individual chapter such as, articulating marginality, examining the narrative of community, oral narrative exploration, re-defining concepts of memory, home, belonging and negotiating cultural shift, the migrant discourse, defining indigenous authenticities and ethnic aesthetics, examining the oral history of violence in literary works and identifying postcolonial studies problems in the application of language theory.

Chapter 1: *Introduction*. This chapter describes the concepts of Indigeneity, Ethnicities and Aesthetics in the narrative of literary works from the North-East in line with the aims of this research. It studies and examines the literary landscape of Indian Writings in English and the emerging new narrative voices from the North-East that is re-tracing the boundaries of literature studies. The chapter also discusses one of the defining characteristics of the region's literary works, which is the intersection of cultural history and imagination as deliberate techniques in framing the network of the

literary production. It provides the research problems and research gaps along with a brief overview of the chapters.

Chapter 2: *Re-negotiated Space and Identity: Indigeneity and Integration*. This chapter examines the need for inclusion of indigenous concepts in literature studies by examining the novels of Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. In these texts, I study the indigenous literary representation and look at how the concepts of community beliefs and practices, continuing and evolving cultural performances, the existing myths and legends are represented within the fictional spaces where events of history underlines the texts. The chapter brings into discussion important questions such as, what is indigenous literature, how do we as readers and scholars evaluate and understand the concept of 'literariness' in indigenous texts and further examines how the minor literary voices of the North-East are represented or underrepresented alongside mainstream literature or more specifically Indian English Writings. Using the concept of museumisation as inferred in the poem "Heritage" of Temsula Ao, this chapter studies the relevance of this term to indigenous literary works as an expression that arrests and disallows the cultural dynamics of the community leading to objectification and creation of labels. The chapter also shows the deep content of cultural artefacts as primary materials in the literary works by validating it through the narrative of the select texts that illustrates the authors' close engagement with the local resources. This thematic feature is further supported and studied by taking a globally shared perspective of Native American writers' whose indigenous identity is firstly, a challenge as they survive, in some cases, in complete dispossession of their human rights and second, the challenge in terms of the unique literary disposition that realizes the need to reclaim indigenous voices in literature studies. Appropriate to the mentioned objectives, this chapter compels a questioning of the difference between - what it is like to include

literature from the North-East to be part of the canon-formation of a larger Indian Writings in English, what do we miss in the scholarship if discourses in the literary works from the region are confined to its political and social contexts.

Chapter 3: *Outsider / Insider: Examining the Narratives of Ethnic Violence and Re-narrating the Nation from the Margin*. This chapter studies the novels of Easterine Kire's *Mari*, Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti* and *Difficult Pleasures* and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* in order to analyze the regional ethnic violence as I seek to understand the contested definition of minority / majority, insider / outsider, home / homelessness in the backdrop of what I would say, an extra-ordinary geopolitical situation. The chapter studies the concept of ethnicity and look at its relevance to the tribal community of North-East India, for whom ethnic elements constitutes, expresses and outlines a strong cultural community within fixed geographical boundaries. I bring this in line with Philip Q. Yang's study of the nature of ethnicity as a construction that have acquired an extensive level of importance in the contemporary society based on which he cites two important questions, "What is the nature of ethnicity? Is ethnicity something that is inherited or something that is constructed? What determines ethnic affiliation or identification? In other words, what is the basis of ethnicity?" (41). To address these questions and contextualize it within the framework of this chapter, I look at the concept of home by defining it as an individual / communities search for identity and location. A large part of my analysis of these concepts comes from the experience of the characters lives where I define a reframed sense of what home is in the light of the various forms of displacements as illustrated in the select texts for study — the period of Second World War, the looming cityscape and the indigenous / ethnic claims. The idea of this chapter comes through my reading of Sanjib Baruah's seminal research on the politics of nationality expounded in his book *India Against Itself* (1999) in which he traces the history of tensions between pan-Indianism and

Assamese subnationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism. Baruah brings into focus the insurgency in Assam to explore the politics of subnationalism, which makes for me an important entry into exploring the ethnic roots of insurgencies in the various other states of North-East India. Hence, the sub-sections of this chapter lays out and uncovers the on going ethnic violence by taking reference from the historical and political narratives expressed in the select literary works that brings forth discussions on the history of subnationalism and cultural politics in North-East India. The chapter makes an instrumental contribution particularly in the study of the regional ethnic conflict narrativized in the literary works.

Chapter 4: *Little Nationalities: About Writings in English*. This chapter studies the narrative expressions in the fictional works of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*. In this chapter, I look at how these writers engagement with specific thematic styles opens up to multiple layers of linguistic expression that naturally leads to new kinds of literary representation. I look at some of the region's common literary tropes such as violence, indigenous and ethnic representations and examine how the multiple layers of linguistic expression and new narrative representation invites a freedom for the writers to converse unreservedly on topics of oral and indigenous narrative, political violence, culture and traditional lifestyle. To recognize the distinct narrative of the texts I look at the way the writers construct the language documentation, expression and pattern that creates a comfortable space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries in the English language. The chapter brings the argument forward by addressing the problems of linguistic representation in the Indian postcolonial scholarship. The linguistic framework of writers like Salman Rushdie and closer to home Mitra Phukan and their idea of constructing "new Englishes" (Phukan 2013; Rushdie 1992) is adopted to appropriately relate their argument, in my thesis, on

whether it is really necessary to work towards cultivating and maintaining a unique collective "Englishes" to understand literary works that are more 'indigenously' inclined or "culture-specific" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation"), to borrow the words of Harish Trivedi.

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*. This chapter reviews the findings of the research and indicates the challenges associated in carrying out this study. The thesis identifies what I define as a literary gap in indigenous aesthetics. Second, it recognizes the singular narrative of the region's political unrest as represented in scholarship. Third, the thesis addresses the above through a traditional qualitative analysis that is corroborated with a quantitative analysis using digital tools. The thesis points to and creates a space for conversation about re-routing the disproportionate focus on the anthropological and sociological dimensions of an otherwise much more varied range of works. The research arrives at understanding an important characteristic feature of indigenous studies that naturally involves an interdisciplinary focus that inclusively discusses social, political, economic, cultural, historical and ideological facets of the indigenous experience. Lastly, the thesis acknowledges the wide range of narratives by recognizing the alternative ways of expression by being cognizant towards 'minor' literary works. While this thesis is written from an indigenous perspective by using engaged western as well as indigenous methodologies it is also fashioned with Martin Nakata's belief of the strength of an indigenous doctorate (2007) that it is, in my case of study, accessible to the mainstream reader. The conclusion chapter suggests some future scope of research.

Appendix-A: *Return of the Spirits: An Interview with Easterine Kire*. This interview is an outcome of my doctoral work. The interview discusses some relevant issues that exist in the scholarship of North-East writings that I observed during my study. It covers some questions that I have been attempting to find

answers to, importantly, on the presence of indigenous materials in the literary works. Some of the questions include, 1) the North-East writings that are either missing or narrowly defined within the context of postcolonial literature 2) the necessity of literary texts that engages with elements and images of superstitions / supernatural and other story-telling tropes and its relevance in the current time of turmoil / unrest. The responses of Easterine Kire, to these and several other questions, have not only expanded and enriched my outlook toward this fascinating body of work but have allowed me to understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can interact, inform and address contemporary issues.

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- "The Pink Sisterhood: Rural activist into Bandits (Gulabi Gang vs Gulaab Gang)" at **15th Annual South Asian Literary Association Conference on Borders, Boundaries and Margins**, 6-7th January 2015, **Vancouver, Canada.**
- "Eco-literary approach of North-East Indian poetry: A selective study" at **BITS Goa Campus, International Conference on Towards Eco-cultural Ethics: Recent Trends and Future Directions**, 9-11th October 2014, Goa India.
- "Forming Space and Recognition through Writing: A study on the Emerging Trends of Literature from North-East" at **Hyderabad University, Researchers at Work Conference on Literature and Culture; Expanding Horizon: New Paradigms of Knowledge Production**, 10-12th September 2014, Hyderabad India.
- "Passion, Protest and Hope: A Reading of Irom Chanu Sharmila's Fragrance of Peace" at **Pondicherry University, National Conference on Indian Literatures in English: New Directions, Newer Possibilities**, 20-21st March 2014, Pondicherry India.

Workshops

- Attended and presented working paper on the topic "Breaking Borders: Towards an Exploration of North-East Indian Literature" at the **Annual Winter Course organized by TISS Guwahati, Stanford University, Stockholm University and University of South Wales on Roots and Bridges: Practicing Interdisciplinary in Research on Northeast India,** 15-21st December 2014.
- Attended a National Workshop on **Digital Humanities: Tools, Texts and Theory**, **Indian Institute of Technology at Indian Institute of Technology Indore,** 19-25th March 2016.
- Attended a National Workshop on **New Developments in Global Political Theory: Comparative, Decolonial and Indian Political Theory, Indian Institute of Technology at Indian Institute of Technology Indore,** 04-08th December 2017.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Narrative analysis in literature studies has always been considered as the point from where the materials we use as research tools begins to take shape as we move forward conversations on recounting an experience or event. Narrative study is particularly important in presenting the framework for understanding indigenous narratives that are often embedded with multiple and complex interpretations of its varied cultural world. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee's essay "Narrative Constructions of Identity and the Sylheti Experience" talks about narrative as a concept that moves beyond conversation of lived experiences or event of an individual / community. She states, "all narratives have an in-built element or universality…for the domain for which they are intended and therefore circulation of a story is a must for artistic survival…Such narratives, if domain specific…are likely to constitute a community that identifies itself with the narrative in terms of a remembered tradition, event or shared reasons and values" (245). For the purpose of the thesis, I look at narrative as a comprehensive concept that invites cross-counter dialogues on narratives that, 1) identifies the rightful authentic voice of an individual / communities 2) constructs a comfortable linguistic space for articulating the minor history and 3) offers a certain amount of flexibility to re-interpret narratives through a thoughtful understanding of the context and premise from which it is written.

My thesis is a study on select works of fiction by contemporary women writers from North-East India. The thesis consciously focuses on women writers from the North-East for some of the following reasons:

1) Women writers from the region contribute to a holistic thematic engagement that moves much beyond narrative of political oppression

2) Male writers such as Siddhartha Deb, Dhruba Hazarika, Aruni Kashyap, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih have contributed widely in poetry and fiction and their works comprehensively reflect the region's political episodes of conflict and violence. Desmond Kharmawphlang underscores the dominant thrust of the literature from the North-East to coin the term 'Terror lore' that explains the literary work of the region (poetry / fiction) emerging from societies besieged by collective fear and insecurity. While their negotiation with the political narrative as a thematic feature is important, their writings are still yet to explore the narratives of spiritual geography that women writers such as Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai and Janice Pariat engage with in their works such as *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *The Black Hill* (2014), *Boats on Land* (2012)

3) In the engagement of the region's debated atmosphere on its several acts of secessionism and seditious streams toward sovereignty, the narrative engagement is different in terms of men and women writers

4) Quantitatively, there is a consistent rise of women writers' contribution to the literary production as compared to their male counterparts.

My approach to women writers is:

1) to explore their narrative expression in interpreting the concepts of indigenous literary tradition, the aesthetic framework of those traditions, the communities' mythologies and histories, artistic practices and the politics and ideologies in the fictional space

2) to place emphasis on the understanding that the women writers engagement on topics of indigenous politics is to put forward a form of self-representation and to assert their literary identity by way of writing themselves into authorship.

The extensive literary production of women writers from the region is acknowledged and identified by scholars and critics. The scholarships that deals with the works of Temsula Ao, Indrani

Raimedhi, Easterine Kire, Mitra Phukan and others shows an increasing rise to move out of anonymity and cultural stereotype. Mala Renganathan's essay "Reflections of Terror in Contemporary Women's Writing in India – West Bengal and Northeast India" is an important work that understands the literary dimension of these writers. Renganathan's essay establishes an important point in articulating a gender perspective on global issues of terror, trauma and violence (7). This perhaps is a significant contribution on female narratives that definitely sets a model for a new genre of women's literature in which she closely analyses the works of Mahasweta Devi, Indira Goswami, Temsula Ao and Irom Sharmila.

The study that collectively collates writers from the eight states in one thesis poses the obvious problem of being unmanageable and scattered. It also invites a danger of creating a fixed label that raises questions on whether the description of a specific cultural activity can or should be conclusively accepted to associate the distinct practices of each community. Therefore, to undertake this collective study on select works of fiction by writers from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland, I specifically choose some key points within a fixed timeframe that coincides with a period of massive change in the literary landscape of Indian Writings in English. I look at the works written between the periods of 2006 to 2014 to coherently examine how these writers interpret the social, cultural and political history in the fictional works. The specified period also reflects an important phase of change in the Indian literary world with the emerging writers 'new narrative voices' that continually retraces the boundaries of Indian literature. This leads to the writers' engagement with narratives that re-defines and re-examines topics of home, cultural assimilation, individual's relation to their culture and tradition taking place in the continuing current of globalisation.

The select texts for study are Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006), *The Black Hill* (2014), Easterine Kire's

Mari (2010), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti* (2009), *Difficult Pleasures* (2013) and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2013). Before moving forward to further discussions, I briefly bring our attention here on the subject of literary and knowledge production (which is a subject for discussion in another paper). The politics of this argument besides various factors of literary credence and value comes across two possible complications first, the publishing industry and second, the scholarly discourse that are a part of canon formation. The publication periods of the above works from the North-East coincide with the publication of some celebrated contemporary mainstream India literary works such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2014) etc. that have undoubtedly garnered wide attention. These groups of writers with the inclusion of few others and their works have taken various news and magazines platform by storm that celebrates their well-deserved acclaim. An online publishing site *Culture Trip* brands these writers as "A New Literary Generation: Five Contemporary Indian Writers" that includes Aravind Adiga, Jeet Thayil, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Amit Chaudhuri. While I acknowledge the brilliant literary input of these works, the 'new' literary generation of writers has to be more inclusive and diverse. To that end, the new literary generation should include writers from the North-East who represent new narrative structures, themes and perspectives in fiction writing.

While I make this foray of paralleling the mainstream literary production against literary works produced from the North-East, based on the period of publication, I am cognizant of the various factors that make for the popularity of mainstream literature: 1) that there is a familiar literary lineage and these writers form a part of that tradition 2) the geographical space they write from is recognized as mainstream and hence readers relate to these works. However, I also observe intersections between the

narrative expressions shared by writers from the mainstream and margin which begs the question of the relative lack of readership of indigenous writers from the North-East. For example, the dense linguistic and thematic style in the work of Aravind Adiga's such as *Between the Assassinations* (2008), *Last Man in Tower* (2012) is similar to Easterine Kire's complex narratives in *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud* (2015). Similarly, Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis* of self-experience and the authenticity with which he tells of a place that is home to him finds affinity with writers like Temsula Ao who narrate a politically driven space that is home to her or Mamang Dai whose narrative expression is presented through lucid and authentic history of her people. Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) that deals with colonial legacy and globalization is comparable to Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* where we see the impression of colonial legacy through an uncalled transaction between the local people and the British settler. These kinds of shared similarity between works, that is thematically far apart yet so in tuned in narratives, speaks of the problem of literary canon formation. The canonical rites in literature studies invites debates on its failure to represent the range of diverse literature of any geography; the problem is accentuated in a multilingual, multiracial space such as India. Such visible and invisible categorization results in what Easterine Kire terms as "definable box" or "the need [of publishers] to put writers, actors, artists in neat boxes" (Sarma 2016).

This categorization works through the characteristics of a 'minor literature' as laid out in Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka (1986) and provide some thoughts on how it might be useful to understand the minor literary works from the North-East. The thesis examines the minor literary voices and challenges the denial of the narrative of the indigenous people, masked by the dominant narrative. In relation to this, it is important to mention here the parallel history of publication to understand how we 1) identify ourselves with the literary works as readers / scholars of literature

2) associate to the comfort of reclining to familiar characters and settings of a book and 3) fail to make selections of text books that may seem less current partly because they are written by authors with unfamiliar names from a smaller (geographical and literary) space. I argue the importance of these 'less' popular / favorable texts through the works of scholars and critics such as Homi Bhabha, Austin Clarke, and closer to home Harish Trivedi who are bringing the discourse of finding narrative voices for writers from the margins. Austin Clarke's essay "The Narrative that Defines Us" points to an important aspect of allowing individuals to have a liberal narrative space where experiences should be conveyed in a language (irrespective of its standards) that can find association with other narratives. What he mentions here relates to another of his essay "The Music of Narrative" where he emphasis the authenticity of first person narrative that gives the "narrative its currency, its historical and racial legitimacy" (19). Clarke further states that the stress for achieving a currency and legitimacy for expression is important as we see a lack of "common language and experience" (29) and hence invites for an invention of new language. In the context of the character Mary-Mathilda of his novel *The Polished Hoe* (2003) and the narrative space he exercises in creating a liberating woman character he states:

> every colonised woman has to face the problem of language; and in facing this problem, she has also, to face the demand of narrative, the concept of that language. The narrative has to devise a literary idiom [as there is a] lack common language and experience. (29)

The colonised woman's experience that Clarke talks about maybe analogous to the linguistic challenge that confronts writers from the North-East expressed by Mitra Phukan, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai and others. The difficulty for these writers rises at many levels where they have to first, establish the thematic content of their work to the readers' and second, are called to be inventive in the English language in order to relate with the context of the

narrative. These writers meet the problem of language and the lack of a narrative space which they directly and indirectly express in their scholarship. Mitra Phukan establishes this argument in her essay "Writing in English in the North-East" where she tells of the several "Englishes" (2013) being forged in the work of writers in English from the region.

In my thesis, where I use and define the term narrative, I am urged to use the entire brief of Homi Bhabha for his forthcoming book *The Right to Narrate* slated to be published by the Columbia University Press. The succinct explanation published for issue 38 under the theme "Do You Read Me" of the "Harvard Design Magazine" precisely sums up an important argument of my thesis, which is the need for 'literary self-determination' for writers from the North-East India. My thesis endeavors to understand and bring the varied kinds of narrative expressions represented in the fictional works to the forefront. Bhabha develops his argument from a larger perspective of reconstruction and reparation of the "silent killing fields of the past and the present" ("The Right to Narrate"). I take his larger perspective and relate to it in an attempt to reconstruct the social, political, cultural and literary narratives of the indigenous communities of North-East. Irrespective of Bhabha's argument from more broader lens and my stance of a similar case from a much smaller location, the ultimate idea of attainment of a "right to address and be addressed, to signify and be interpreted, to speak and be heard, to make a sign and to know that it will receive respectful attention" ("The Right to Narrate") is applicable to any societies that are silenced.

Literature from the North-East incorporates an expansive thematic range that covers a large number of engaging themes on borders, boundaries, identity, location of home and culture and the oral tradition. However, the scholarships of these literary works are often misrepresented by popular and media-driven narratives based on the region's definition of political conflict and unrest. Hence, the literary works produced from the region get defined on two

problematic premises, 1) of the regions political implications and 2) the wide spectrum of ethnological narrative. In this thesis, I am going to argue that while both of these are important elements, they are disproportionately represented in the discourse of North-East literature to the exclusion of other aesthetics and literary parameters. The thesis recognizes and tries to locate a literary gap through a critical examination of aesthetic questions that is important and has not been addressed in the scholarship of North-East literature.

The thesis selection of the eight contemporary texts written in English derives from a pragmatic approach after reading some of the works contributed by the male writers of the region. The thesis, based on the select texts, helps to examine an important characteristic feature in the narrative of these works, which is the intersection of fictional narrative alongside the region's history, society, culture and political representation. Along with this, some important thematic concerns I look at include the representation of the indigenous literary tradition, the aesthetic framework of these traditions, the communities' mythologies and histories, artistic practices and the politics and ideologies of these communities'. While the literary works from the North-East contribute largely to the region's history of orality and are thematically specific within the region, indigenous studies across the world has always had a rich literary tradition. We see examples of such works in Native Americans, Australian aborigines and part of African-American literature. Indigenous narrative in the literary works from the North-East is an extension of the communities' history of orality that is evolved from a distinct account of myth and folklore. For example, Temsula Ao in her poem "Stone-people from Lungterok" tells of the genesis of the Ao tribe of Nagaland from the mythical six stones, a community of tribal people who believe to have emerged out of the earth. Similarly, Mamang Dai's continuity and engagement in oral tradition is maintained with her strong notion of believe that there is always history in our words, the jungle is not

just a patch of greens there are voices, the rivers is not just a flow of water and that all these and everything has a landscape ("Publishing Next"). Janice Pariat's oral narrative also needs a mention here as we read of souls turning into trees alongside the deeply entrenched oral practices of mantras that serve as a weapon for destruction, the description of which is read in the beautiful evocative opening story titled "A Waterfall of Horses" of her debut fiction *Boats on Land* (2012).

Alongside such mythopoeic narratives that assert the indigenous cultural identity of the community the political narratives too find its expression in the literary works. Some examples are Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* and *A Naga Village Remembered*, Aruni Kashyap's *The House With a Thousand Stories* (2013) and the poems of Monalisa Changkija, Robin S. Ngangom, Irom Chanu Sharmila and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih that reveals a keen political edge. However, there is a misconception of these works in the mainstream imagination that often singularly defines the region based on the narrative of political unrest. Such misreading can be attributed to media-driven narratives that reflect a certain stereotyping of the region. Aruni Kashyap talks of a spillover as literature from the North-East is approached with terms such as "literature from the conflict zone" or "a new heart of darkness is getting discovered" ("Talking of Assam"). These singular representations are identified as a problem in my thesis. To deconstruct the limited definition and interpretation of a heterogeneous community Easterine Kire suggests the need to "get rid of the stereotypes [in our] mind to understand the vast variety there, the people…the places" ("Nowhere people"), a practice she employs to understand the poetic reality of Goirick Brahmachari's poetry *For the Love of Pork* (2016).

To establish a nuanced understanding of these intersections, the thesis questions the canonization process by examining the literary demand of a narrative of 'national prototype'. As the

literary works I engage with contains ethnic / indigenous aesthetics that does not always align with mainstream Indian literature narratives there is a tendency to view these texts from a familiar trope which I argue results, at best, an incomplete reading and at worst, a misreading of these texts. This practice of perfecting the 'other' towards a 'standard' approach leads to an over-simplification of a disparate body of work. The demand towards a narrative of national prototype poses several interlinked questions that are addressed in the thesis. My research questions are: 1) What are the kinds of narratives that should be included for a literary genre? 2) How do we define the narrative with respect to literature from the North-East since it does not adhere to the standard narrative of mainstream Indian literature 3) How do we develop an aesthetic framework for situating or contextualizing the indigenous narratives 4) How does cultural identity and traditional aesthetic function in the fictional works of North-East? To provide an answer to these questions I look at how these writers, in drawing a very 'community based' narrative, locate a sense of literary connectedness by being vocal and expressive of their cultural identity in the fictional works. These complex issues and questions are considered in my thesis to allow readers in understanding how the dynamics of culture, society and identity of the tribal community are part of the narrative framework for its literary works.

To identify the gap of indigenous aesthetics I redefine the common literary tropes of violence and ethnic representations in the literary works. I elaborate upon these tropes that have affected the literary scene by carrying out a textual study through which I establish that the manifestations and experiences of violence and indigenous reveals a different character from how it is represented. In response to the several interlinked questions posed in the preceding paragraph I establish here the following observations:

1) Indigenous narrative in literary works is largely an extension of the writer's cultural attachment to his / her community and hence

will incorporate topics focused on cultures, histories, knowledges and perspectives of the society. In the context of North-East literature, the political as well as the cultural narratives function as predominant themes as it allows the work to be firmly rooted in the multiple realities of life that surround them. Indigenous work naturally invites an interdisciplinary focus that inclusively discusses social, political, economic, cultural, historical and ideological facets of the communities' experiences and therefore, the intersection of these narratives will be a thematic background for the writers.

2) The absence of a 'standard' narrative (defined as a narrative of national prototype) in the literary works from the North-East excludes the works from the canonical umbrella of Indian literature. The reason for such exclusion are varied and numerous, an example being the discourse on Indian literature, especially, post 1947 which is often viewed within the context of a larger national narrative. The nation and its postcolonial challenges become themes and sub-themes in many works of Indian writings in English and hence, this imagined nation often excludes elements of indigeneity and ethnicity that is otherwise a fundamental frame to the region's literature.

G. Deleuze and F. Guattari analyses Kafka as producer of minor literature in the essay "What Is a Minor Literature?" The essay examines the various ways in which a minor literary work is characterized: 1) deterritorialization of language 2) the connection of the individual to political immediacy and 3) the collective assemblage of enunciation. The essential point of the essay is to deconstruct the idea of a major language that continues to be the central approach in the classification of a good literary work. This argument of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari is carried forward in the fourth chapter of the thesis where I study the need for language to find a valid platform for literary expression by aiding an important passage from the essay that states, "A minor literature is not the

literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (16).

Terrence McDonough's essay "Who Blushes at the name" is also useful to understand the predicament of minor literatures in as much as it informs a cultural denial from within a dominant culture. McDonough essay examines the quality of minority in the work of the Irish historical economist, John Kells Ingram. Though the essay discusses the issues of minor literature in the history of economic thought, the critical understanding and definition of McDonough is important and relevant. Minor literature invites us to address the issues of canonicity as he pose the question of: "who qualifies for entry into the canon…? and why" (146). This question is relevant to the problems of postcolonial studies that brings challenging questions of which national literatures or authors can or should be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. It is important to re-write this question in the context of my thesis and ask who qualifies for entry into the canon of 'great literature' and why.

1.1 Overview of the Thesis

The thesis contains three core chapters 1) Re-negotiated Space and Identity: Indigeneity and Integration 2) Outsider / Insider: Examining the Narratives of Ethnic Violence and Re-narrating the Nation from the Margin and 3) Little Nationalities: About Writings in English. The thesis also incorporates an interview with Easterine Kire titled, Return of the Spirits: An Interview with Easterine Kire. Each chapters of the thesis includes sub-sections that closely studies some key concepts of the individual chapter such as, articulating marginality, examining the narrative of community, oral narrative exploration, re-defining concepts of memory, home, belonging and negotiating cultural shift, the migrant discourse, defining indigenous authenticities and ethnic aesthetics, examining the oral history of violence in literary works and identifying postcolonial studies problems in the application of language theory.

Chapter 1: *Introduction*. This chapter describes the concepts of Indigeneity, Ethnicities and Aesthetics in the narrative of literary works from the North-East in line with the aims of this research. It studies and examines the literary landscape of Indian Writings in English and the emerging new narrative voices from the North-East that is re-tracing the boundaries of literature studies. The chapter also discusses one of the defining characteristics of the region's literary works, which is the intersection of cultural history and imagination as deliberate techniques in framing the network of the literary production. It provides the research problems and research gaps along with a brief overview of the chapters.

Chapter 2: *Re-negotiated Space and Identity: Indigeneity and Integration*. This chapter examines the need for inclusion of indigenous concepts in literature studies by examining the novels of Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. In these texts, I study the indigenous literary representation and look at how the concepts of community beliefs and practices, continuing and evolving cultural performances, the existing myths and legends are represented within the fictional spaces where events of history underlines the texts. The chapter brings into discussion important questions such as, what is indigenous literature, how do we as readers and scholars evaluate and understand the concept of 'literariness' in indigenous texts and further examines how the minor literary voices of the North-East are represented or underrepresented alongside mainstream literature or more specifically Indian English Writings. Using the concept of museumisation as inferred in the poem "Heritage" of Temsula Ao, this chapter studies the relevance of this term to indigenous literary works as an expression that arrests and disallows the cultural dynamics of the community leading to objectification and creation of labels. The chapter also shows the deep content of cultural artefacts as primary materials in the literary

works by validating it through the narrative of the select texts that illustrates the authors' close engagement with the local resources. This thematic feature is further supported and studied by taking a globally shared perspective of Native American writers' whose indigenous identity is firstly, a challenge as they survive, in some cases, in complete dispossession of their human rights and second, the challenge in terms of the unique literary disposition that realizes the need to reclaim indigenous voices in literature studies. Appropriate to the mentioned objectives, this chapter compels a questioning of the difference between - what it is like to include literature from the North-East to be part of the canon-formation of a larger Indian Writings in English, what do we miss in the scholarship if discourses in the literary works from the region are confined to its political and social contexts.

Chapter 3: ***Outsider / Insider: Examining the Narratives of Ethnic Violence and Re-narrating the Nation from the Margin*****.** This chapter studies the novels of Easterine Kire's *Mari*, Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti* and *Difficult Pleasures* and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* in order to analyze the regional ethnic violence as I seek to understand the contested definition of minority / majority, insider / outsider, home / homelessness in the backdrop of what I would say, an extra-ordinary geopolitical situation. The chapter studies the concept of ethnicity and look at its relevance to the tribal community of North-East India, for whom ethnic elements constitutes, expresses and outlines a strong cultural community within fixed geographical boundaries. I bring this in line with Philip Q. Yang's study of the nature of ethnicity as a construction that have acquired an extensive level of importance in the contemporary society based on which he cites two important questions, "What is the nature of ethnicity? Is ethnicity something that is inherited or something that is constructed? What determines ethnic affiliation or identification? In other words, what is the basis of ethnicity?" (41). To address these questions and contextualize it within the framework of this chapter, I look at the concept of home

by defining it as an individual / communities search for identity and location. A large part of my analysis of these concepts comes from the experience of the characters' lives where I define a reframed sense of what home is in the light of the various forms of displacements as illustrated in the select texts — the period of Second World War, the looming cityscape and the indigenous / ethnic claims. The idea of this chapter comes through my reading of Sanjib Baruah's seminal research on the politics of nationality expounded in his book *India Against Itself* (1999) in which he traces the history of tensions between pan-Indianism and Assamese subnationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism. Prof. Baruah brings into focus the insurgency in Assam to explore the politics of subnationalism, which makes for me an important entry into exploring the ethnic roots of insurgencies in the various other states of North-East India. Hence, the sub-sections of this chapter lays out and uncovers the ongoing ethnic violence by taking reference from the historical and political narratives expressed in the select literary works that brings forth discussions on the history of subnationalism and cultural politics in North-East India. The chapter makes an instrumental contribution particularly in the study of the regional ethnic conflict narrativized in the literary works.

Chapter 4: *Little Nationalities: About Writings in English*. This chapter studies the narrative expressions in the fictional works of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*. In this chapter, I look at how these writers engagement with specific thematic styles opens up to multiple layers of linguistic expression that naturally leads to new kinds of literary representation. I look at some of the region's common literary tropes such as violence, indigenous and ethnic representations and examine how the multiple layers of linguistic expression and new narrative representation invites a freedom for the writers to converse unreservedly on topics of oral and indigenous narrative, political violence, culture and traditional lifestyle. To recognize the distinct

narrative of the texts, I look at the way the writers construct the language documentation, expression and pattern that creates a comfortable space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries in the English language. The chapter brings the argument forward by addressing the problems of linguistic representation in the Indian postcolonial scholarship. The linguistic framework of writers like Salman Rushdie and closer to home Mitra Phukan and their idea of constructing "new Englishes" (Phukan 2013; Rushdie 1992) is adopted to appropriately relate their argument, in my thesis, on whether it is really necessary to work towards cultivating and maintaining a unique collective "Englishes" to understand literary works that are more 'indigenously' inclined or "culture-specific" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation"), to borrow the words of Harish Trivedi.

Chapter 5: *Conclusion*s. This chapter reviews the findings of the research and indicates the challenges associated in carrying out this study. The thesis identifies what I define as a literary gap in indigenous aesthetics. Second, it recognizes the singular narrative of the region's political unrest as represented in scholarship. Third, the thesis addresses the above through a traditional qualitative analysis that is corroborated with a quantitative analysis using digital tools. The thesis points to and creates a space for conversation about re-routing the disproportionate focus on the anthropological and sociological dimensions of an otherwise much more varied range of works. The research arrives at understanding an important characteristic feature of indigenous studies that naturally involves an interdisciplinary focus that inclusively discusses social, political, economic, cultural, historical and ideological facets of the indigenous experience. Lastly, the thesis acknowledges the wide range of narratives by recognizing the alternative ways of expression by being cognizant towards 'minor' literary works. While this thesis is written from an indigenous perspective by using engaged western as well as indigenous methodologies it is also fashioned with Prof. Martin Nakata's belief

of the strength of an indigenous doctorate (2007) that it is, in my case of study, accessible to the mainstream reader. The conclusion chapter suggests some future scope of research.

Appendix – I: ***Return of the Spirits: An Interview with Easterine Kire.*** This interview is an outcome of my doctoral work. The interview discusses some relevant issues that exist in the scholarship of North-East writings which I observed during my study. It covers some questions that I have been attempting to find answers to, importantly, on the presence of indigenous materials in the literary works. Some of the questions include, 1) the North-East writings that are either missing or narrowly defined within the context of postcolonial literature 2) the necessity of literary texts that engages with elements and images of superstitions / supernatural and other story-telling tropes and its relevance in the current time of turmoil / unrest. The responses of Easterine Kire, to these and several other questions, have not only expanded and enriched my outlook toward this fascinating body of work but have allowed me to understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can interact, inform and address contemporary issues.

North-East literature shares many feature of what is Indian literature but also has its own singular aesthetics. This uncertain space and ambiguity to a larger nationalist literary culture makes my thesis an exciting yet a challenging prospect. The singular aesthetic of the literary works is extensively addressed throughout the chapters of the thesis however, particularly in the fourth chapter where I argue against postcolonial studies as a discipline that needs to re-examine its theoretical vocabulary to accommodate the distinctive narrative patterns and expressions of an indigenous literary work. Nirmala Menon and Marika Preziuso in *Migrant Identities of "Creole Cosmopolitans": Transcultural Narratives of Contemporary Postcoloniality* (2014) assert the necessity of how the study of postcolonial must be inclusive and multilingual in which languages other than English should be the choice of focus (ix). And yet this disproportionate focus on writing in English

within the postcolonial canon excludes these writers from the North-East who primarily write in English. My thesis takes up discussions on the convergence of specific histories (literary, social, cultural and political) of the region from where I observe that the literary tradition of North-East, grounded from a particular set of individual cultural motives, is a way of asserting their unique aesthetics.

Chapter 2

Re-negotiated Space and Identity: Indigeneity and Integration

The land is sacred; it belongs to the countless numbers who are dead, the few who are living, and the multitudes of those yet to be born - Penan[1]*,* Sarawak, Malaysia

2.1 Introduction

In the introduction of Temsula Ao's collected poems from 1988-2007, GJV Prasad writes about the danger of the ethnic that may soon become "a chic marketable commodity" (xiv) especially in the literary circle. He relates this statement in reading Ao's poem "Songbird" in which the poet takes a cautious position in becoming less of a tribal writer-informant and more as a writer or a storyteller.

North-East studies has often been the umbrella term that covers a wide range of research areas such as literature, political science, history, anthropology, ethnic studies etc. This term has had the effect of homogenizing disparate areas and consequently often missing or misrepresenting specific forms of cultural production. Similarly, an imagining of its geography as a single entity when it is home to eight very distinct states, in terms of cultural, social, political and economic practices. Such discounted interpretation demonstrates the need to undertake this study as I focus on diverse concepts and components that cover the literary works from the region. The exercise includes an analysis on first, understanding the representation of the indigenous and ethnic elements in the fictional works and second, disseminating the concept of indigeneity by studying it in accordance with the geographical settings of each novels that will aid in recognizing the singular cultural aspects of each states.

This chapter carries out a textual study on the texts of Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006), Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012) and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014). In these texts, I study the indigenous representation and look at how the concepts of community beliefs and practices, continuing and evolving cultural performances, the existing myths and legends are represented within the fictional spaces of the texts. Therefore, this chapter brings into discussion some important questions such as, what is indigenous literature, how do we as readers and scholars evaluate and understand the concept of 'literariness' in indigenous texts and further examines how the minor literary voices of the North-East are represented or underrepresented alongside mainstream literature or more specifically Indian English Writings. The chapter through textual analysis studies the cultural shift taking place as a result of influences from urban, consumer-based cultures and various political and religious agendas and examines the negative or ambivalent aspects of cultural change and loss. One of the objectives of this chapter is to transcend the definition of indigenous literary narrative beyond the idea of sustenance of cultural identity and to allow non-indigenous societies to understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can interact, inform and address contemporary issues.

Indigenous literature as a study is a new arrival in the field of Indian English literature. Earlier works of Indian literature shows scattered elements of indigeneity mostly in its representation of characters as read in works of Mahasweta Devi, Arun Joshi, Ruskin Bond etc. However, the gist of indigenous literary representation comes from the writings produced from the North-East region and the area known as the central tribal belt stretching from Rajasthan to West Bengal. The narratives of the emerging indigenous writers' moves away from the general themes that

confront the nation and society as their writings reflect a deep sense of awareness of the culture they write about. Such narratives echo an important rationale of one's cultural identity and affinity, as the engagement with an indigenous topic is not to situate cultures within fixed frames but to carry out dialogues and conversations. The emerging indigenous voices, besides writers from the North-East, includes Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), Gladson Dungdung's *Whose Country is it Anyway?* (2013) and Ruby Hembron's *Disaibon Hul* (2014) or the *Santhal* (a tribe of people indigenous to the Indian States of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Assam and also one of the largest tribal communities in India) creation stories such as *We Come from the Geese* (2013) and *Earth Rests on a Tortoise* (2013).

Indigeneity is a concept that cannot be read or studied in isolation. With the varying term that is used over countries, Aborigines in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, First Nations in Canada, Indigenous in United States, Janajatis in India, these ethnic groups are highly dispersed in terms of space and place. The distinct tribe of every community illustrates a very divergent history that does not make it possible to encapsulate them under one single arrangement. Indigeneity in literature studies explores various subjects that are often under-represented in the larger national narratives. The varied subjects includes topics of marginal linguistics, its aesthetic framework, the communities origins, myths, artistic practices and patterns and the politics embedded to the community social system. It also brings into discussion specific histories of conflict, stereotyping of knowledge and the question of representation, all of which results from a deep cultural consciousness.

Literary scholarship of North-East addresses these subjects as the works of fiction show an extensive exercise and use of cultural artefacts as its primary material. The select texts for this chapter are relevant in this context as they illustrate the authors'

deep and close engagement with the local resources. The cultural elements present in these works are carefully studied in order to avoid its reductive categorization as a study of anthropological and sociological treatise. While this implies a concerning challenge on topic of cultural studies the other challenge lies in the exploitative use of culture as mere brand names and commodity markers in the face of globalization. Cultural representation surfaces and re-surfaces in the texts from the North-East that comes through the indigenous arts, beliefs and practices of the ethnic communities. Such representation often poses serious narrative concerns in the literary works and in its scholarly studies. We read of such challenges as writers such as Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire expresses in their scholarship a deep cultural consciousness and emphasizes the need to understand the force of globalization that is beginning to mutate and reduce the cultural identity of ethnic communities. An essay titled "Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective" by Temsula Ao puts forth a similar expression where she talks about contemporary challenges of North-East cultures that are beginning to evolve "stripped of all human significance" (7) due to the global market. In the same lines, Easterine Kire remarks the need for an authentic preservation and presentation of the ethnic elements that is gradually being washed away with the force of urbanization. She points out the unconscious act of "cultural theft" in Nagaland by stressing the ignorance of the indigenous people who "readily part with their handicrafts and information on their culture because they do not realize that it is being traded for money in an economically global world" ("Barkweaving").

The act of "cultural theft" does leads to the rebirth of cultural objects by giving legitimacy and new status and identity. However, while this allows one to realize and understand his / her own culture and look with new eyes it simultaneously questions the value of the cultural objects that is viewed by the 'other' eyes. While this may, on the one hand, illustrate the value of these

cultural artifacts to the community on the other hand there is a danger of consequent museumisation of these objects within closed and defined frames of reference. It also leads to objectification and creation of labels, which within any parameter subjects the victim to remain mute.

The opening essay titled "Listening to the Pterodactyl" of a book edited by G N Devy, Geoffrey V. Davis and K K Chakravarty brings out an insightful reading by Shiv Visvanathan. With illustration to the stories of Mahasweta Devi, he examines the idea of a tribal and how society creates for him a playground where his identity gets essentialized and categorized. He further brings into discussion texts and theories of Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Trites Tropiques* (1922), *The Savage Mind* (1968), *Totemism* (1971) that draws attention on first, the vulnerability of culture and second, the aesthetic savage minds that is on the same linear line with civilized minds. Visvanathan in the essay dismantles Anthropology as a subject that is there to forcefully disengage people from society, to create binaries within code of conduct and celebrate the birth of the 'other' that are stacked up in museum or what Visvanathan terms as "a reservation" that invites cultural "death and formaldehyde" (3). To this he mentions:

> It has sanctified the Other, museumized the Other, developed the Other, eliminated the Other and yet has always been haunted by the Other. (4)

The act of musuemization that I draw from the readings of scholarly works of Easterine Kire and Visvanathan brings me to Temsula Ao's poem "Heritage" which is relevant and relatable. The narrative of this poem that explain the experience of Temsula Ao's visit to a museum in Europe, displaying artifacts from her part of the world in glass windows, reveal the cultural oppression of

indigenous cultures that inherently indicate its inferiority over a mainstream culture. I bring an extensive excerpt from the poem:

> caged within imposing structures
> in designated spaces
> with labels that scream
> DO NOT TOUCH…
>
> So I wander aimlessly…
> when suddenly I spy
> a never-before-seen
> gorgeous body-cloth
> of glorious colours
> reposing
> inside a glass cage.
>
> As if pulled by a mystic thread
> I draw closer and read the label
> that proclaims this marvel
> to have come from my tribe!
>
> I stand there stunned
> with the silent anguish
> of the truly dis-possessed
> and mortified that
> I had to traverse the skies
> to have a first glimpse
> of what is essentially mine…
>
> In the sepulchral stillness
> of the alien halls
> I survey the way-laid treasures
> of my heritage, and wonder if they still
> possess their original aura.

or have they just become
exotic possessions from an ignorable past? (Ao 3-89)

Taking this observation to the larger question of placing the indigenous on the literary maps, Coomaraswamy poses a question that need serious thinking. Uncertain on how and where one should locate the displaced tribals he says:

> If God appeared on earth and enquired for the Aztecs, Incas, Red Indians, Australian aborigines and other slowly disappearing races, would civilized man take him to the museum? (qtd. in Visvanathan 3-4)

Nilanjana Deb's essay "People-centric Histories of Indigenous Literature: Thoughts on Theory and Praxis" carries forward a discourse on the ethic of writing literary histories of the aboriginal / indigenous community as she foregrounds two fundamental approaches. I find an interesting observation on one of the approaches that explains the pan-aboriginal topic serving a "convenient strategy" (47) for the writers. Though her essay emphasizes the appreciative paradigm of studying indigenous literature she states that the convenient strategy cannot be used as a tool to simplistically decode the aborigines under one common category. In her argument she throws light on the question of alternative modernities and the problems of location-specific in studying literature as a subject that creates a politics of exclusion whereby texts not mentioned in the histories of literature are forgotten. Deb refers to the essay of Renate Eidgenbrod "Not Just a Text: 'Indigenizing' the Study of Indigenous Literatures" to explain 1) how indigenous texts and writings comes from an altogether separate unit 2) have its own unique attribute and 3) cannot in any way be dismissed as a by-product of the post-colonial subject. Similarly, the cultural context of indigenous texts varies along the writer use of "landscape, dreams, prophesy, memory" (50) in a style

or method that is different from how it is explained in other classical literary studies.

In bringing together the various artistic representations of indigenous communities' and to have a nuanced understanding of their beliefs and practices, I refer and relate to the cultural consciousness of the First Nations in Canada. The inventive work of an Ojibwe / Anishinaabe photographer Nadya Kwandibens bring an important enquiry into why there is a need for "resistance and continuity" ("Red Works Photography"). Kwandibens exposes and deconstructs through her photographs, published in a website called Red Works Photography, the stoic representation of Indian in closed books, museums, movies that does not allow the people to be characteristic of more cosmopolitan vivid group of people. The quotation cited below, on the Native American and their marginal position perhaps is the challenge of all indigenous communities' that struggles to find a narrative for continuity and reclaims history:

> We, as Indigenous people, are often portrayed in history books as Nations once great; in museums as Nations frozen stoic; in the media as Nations forever troubled. These images can be despairing; however, my goal seeks to steer the positive course. If our history is a shadow, let this moment serve as light. We are musicians, lawyers, doctors, mothers and sons. We are activists, scholars, dreamers, fathers and daughters. Let us claim ourselves now and see that we are, and will always be great, thriving, balanced civilizations capable of carrying ourselves into this bright new day. ("Red Works Photography")

2.2 Articulating Marginality and Building a Literary Paradigm for a North-East Discourse in Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006)

Mamang Dai's writing reflects a deep community awareness of her native homeland. Her fictional works including

Legends of Pensam (hereafter mentioned as *LOP*) spans the journey of the Adi [2] tribesmen as she chronologizes the community's history from its ancient forms of beliefs and practices to its contemporary set up. As Dai records the history of a community whose narrative evolve from a rich account of oral tradition, her concern in narrativizing the Adi tribesmen in the literary space is most vital to engage the tribal communities history with a wider audience. Kristina Fagan in an essay titled "What about you? Approaching the Study of Native Literature" define such act of cultural representation as she makes a significant approach towards writing and engaging with the aesthetics of native literature. She states the importance of:

> understanding the distinctive Aboriginal quality of the literature and resisting any over-simplifying conclusions…[which also at the same time means looking at the] shared history and perspectives of Native people on their own terms…[and paying attention to] their particular complexities whether they be individual, tribal, regional, political etc. (244)

To examine the narrative technique followed by Mamang Dai in her book *LOP*, I undertake a close study of Dai's relationship with the subject of her book that is the Adi community. *LOP* covers nineteen stories that beautifully chronicle the story of a community that displays a rich oral culture through the community's strong beliefs that reverberates through each individual stories and characters. The narrative, on one hand, opens up to a host of memorable characters steeped in traditional tribal beliefs and living vulnerable lives influenced by spirits, shamans and unnatural events as we read of, "people [having] premonitions. Women dream dreams. Babies are born who grow up unnaturally fast, like deer or lion cubs" (10). Alongside the surreal narratives we read of historical developments taking place in the tribal region around the 19th-20th centuries, which is seen, in the later sections of the book.

For example, the fourth section of the text titled “a matter of time” brings in a picture of gradual change developing stealthily among the Adi clansman, which is certainly uninvited and unwelcomed by the tribal inhabitants. In the four sections of the book that chronologize the history of Adi community Dai interestingly throws light on the uncertainties and apprehensions of the local people with the arrival of geographical and cultural change.

Similar to the narrative structure used by Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home* (2006) that sets the stories in a chronological time-frame, beginning with the advancement of insurgency in Nagaland to the later sections of the stories that points to a new definition of political chaos in the state, Mamang Dai employs a similar method in *LOP*. *LOP* begins with the birth of the character Hoxo “the boy who fell to earth” (13), whose narrative can metaphorically be aligned to the birth of the community, who as the narrative develops is presented in the latter chapters as a grandfather to a gratifying inquisitive young modern granddaughter. Such chronological timeframe is an essential feature for indigenous literature for the following reasons: 1) the oral method of storytelling for communities that relies on a tradition of orality will incorporate their description, to a large extent, on events of history to enhance their narrative that is based on connected events and spontaneous conversational descriptions 2) also, from a more structural perspective, Easterine Kire agrees with the exercise of such narrative structure because of the fact that the written literature from the region is so young, chronologizing history becomes essential to methodically record the historical events that have shaped the community and to see the contemporary socio-cultural changes. The concept of chronologizing and recording the indigenous oral narrative is extended in the voice of the characters, an example of which follows in Dai’s story:

> 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? (176-177)

Indigenous communities exist within societal structures that govern the political, cultural and economic rights of the people. Such is the case with the customs and practices of the indigenous people from the North-East who understands the significance of cultural and political sovereignty through its community based pre-existing governance that has been in practice before the establishment of structured institutions. The practice of self-governance creates negative inhibition towards new structures and methods leading to an urgent need of the indigenous communities to challenge and dismantle the empowering structures of the emerging institutions. Such evasion of one's cultural products assists writers-artists from the region to repossess their past and redefine themselves and their identity in the context of their roots. In the narrative of the stories the assertive stand is taken over by the older inhabitants of the place who displays apprehensiveness towards new changes. Dai's story "the old man and fires" points to such narrative where the elders of the community contend their strength and capability against the idea of the imposing new change. Following such stories are the ones titled "the road" where the inhabitants refuse to accept the prospect of a better road and remain persistent of which we see in the following conversation:

> Larik, son of Togla, was the most animated. 'He has no idea about the situation,' he said, referring to Duan [the representative of the local people]. 'He thinks if we wait and be patient the government will reward us. Reward us with what? This one terrible road is all they have managed for us in fifty years! And what does it bring us? Outsiders.

> Thieves. Disease. Will this road bring us good health?...I have seen the roads in the capital and they are worse than the one they are building here. If they cannot tidy up there what guarantee do we have…especially when they don't know or bother to find out who we are and how we live!'
>
> Larik was speaking with such anger and urgency that his friends were spellbound. 'We deserve better,' Larik was saying. 'We deserve more than words.' (156-157)

In this we see the refusal through individuals such as Larik whose antagonist stance stems not only from a xenophobic indigenous position towards outsiders but responds from a more calculative proclamation of failures that he see around. Hence, the evident demand of natives like him to live within their own social set-up is apparent as new social orders and standards take over.

> The village was fighting a grim battle…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 new identity. Leave us alone. (158)

Works such as *LOP* that is thematically dense with community-based narrative brings, to a certain extent, a paradigm shift in the literary discourse. This shift is important as it conveys and assists the writers' in presenting an authentic illustration towards negative categorizing and multiple popular media definition of the region. Contemporary writers such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat, Robin S. Ngangom, Aruni Kashyap etc. employs cultural materials which sensitizes our response and allows us to understand the importance of indigenous writings. Easterine Kire directs us to this need as she tells of the authentic preservation and presentation of the ethnic elements by deepening her stakes for a more inclusive Indian academia curriculum structure. She states that Indian Universities

at present needs to re-vamp its curriculum and include texts from the North-East as "so much is being published from the region [and there can be] no excuses for Indian academia to ignore literature of the North-East region" (IBN 2012). With the decent amount of readers and scholars' present engagement with literary works from the North-East, it is important and a challenge as well for readers participating in these works, to understand the creative mechanisms of the works that are often written alongside intriguing narratives of folktale. The intersection of cultural history and imagination is so important for many reasons: 1) it reflects 'new narrative voices' that retraces the boundaries of Indian literature 2) redefines conversations in its scholarship that labels people from the region as communities living in 'enchanted spaces'[3] and importantly 3) opens an alternative space for the writers to re-write history. The concept of re-writing history creates an alternate narrative of the region that should be read and understood in the similar context of how contemporary writers from the region have taken to acknowledge the remarkable storytelling tradition by archiving the oral through written literature. Tilottoma Misra talks about similar cognizance in the introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Wrtings from North-East India* (2011) where she states:

> People whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future. (xvii)

The concept of Eurocentric modernity mentioned by Misra here is a challenge not only to literary texts and scholarship from the North-East but to all indigenous writings across the world, as well as literary works that are termed as marginal. These bodies of work dismisses engaging with what is known as 'nationalistic' narratives

and includes an illustration of smaller narratives, which for the writers are more available, relevant and anchored to the everyday lives of the societies. The indigenous communities of Africa and America continues to re-create history as a means to resist the colonial project that negates its history and eventually its literature. The denial of history and its exclusion in literary conversations is an injury that is suffered by societies that exists at the receiving end. Such exclusion is familiar in the discourse of North-East studies that rarely gets a passing nod in the historical narrative of India, in all of its Ancient, Medieval or Modern periods. Few of the literary works that narrativizes the participation of North Easterners in the Freedom Struggle of India such as Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's 1979 Jnanpith Award winning novel *Mrityunjaya* (1979), Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010) or Siddhartha Sarma's award-winning *The Grasshoppers Run* (2009) are rarely read alongside popular histories of the nation.

In line with the idea of articulating marginality in literature studies it is imperative here to dwell upon the concept of exclusion. To discuss the notion of exclusion with examples and evidences from across the world, I look at Chinua Achebe's highly influential essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*". This essay pens down an observation and experience of Achebe. Although Joseph Conrad's fiction is taken, in Achebe's words, to "embark on the exercise…of a novelist [response] to one famous book of European fiction" (783) this reference is taken here to explain, apart from Achebe's personal experience and understanding of Conrad's text, the angst of losing one's society in the mind of western psychology. The 'image' of Africa has constantly been talked, debated and referred to by writers from Africa and writers that talks about Africa such as Toni Morrison, Ngûgî wa Thiong'o, Ben Okri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe – to name a few. The need to look up to their scholarship is relevant given the fact that there is a continuous and a certain kind

of exclusion, erasure and categorization, especially when literatures from 'conflict zones' are produced. I fairly agree with Achebe's remark, in his essay, on a student ignorance about his new found 'fascination' with the customs and superstitions of an African tribe, where Achebe quite accurately says that perhaps the young students is probably unaware, "that the life of his tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions" (782). Such 'fascination' is a result of the massive amount of ignorance and the psychological inability to accept the history of the 'other'. I draw to a significant portion from the essay:

> In the fall of 1974…at the University of Massachusetts…an older man…asked me What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain Community College not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know. By this time I was walking much faster. "Oh well," I heard him say finally, behind me: "I guess I have to take your course to find out". (782)

This relegation of a fellow white Professor, Achebe tells, is quite simply:

> the desire -- one might indeed say the need -- in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. (783)

The discourse and critique on Achebe's essay have given voice to similar marginal literature that stand in conflict to mainstream literary arts. However, this exclusionary process has, to a large extent, allowed writers' from the North-East to accept its distinctive quality and to undertake the notion of difference as a

literary prospect to frame and develop its unique cultural products. Temsula Ao exhibits the oral arts in written, which shape the narrative of her stories. What she expresses in an essay "Writing Orality" of the content and thematic range of North-East literatures is so relevant in our current literary discourse where we measure a work of literature against the structures of other canonical texts. She states:

> the people of North East India seem to have attained a new 'maturity' on their perceptions about themselves, that the 'other' of their position vis-à-viz mainland India was not 'them' elsewhere but very much within their own sense of isolation in an oral culture. Once articulated through the written text, similarities of world-views with other cultures have helped forge new affinities, and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than as denominators of any deficiency or inferiority. (109)

Indigenous narrative documents the oral history of a lesser-known community, prioritizes the culture and sustains the identity of the society and its people. Despite the current narrative transmission of the indigenous histories from the oral method to the written form there is still a certain amount of resistance of a complete departure from the oral aesthetics. Although most oral societies, such as the North-East, use the written word as a tool for documentation, expression and communication there is yet an understanding, acknowledgement and dependence among these writers' who value the oral transmission of knowledge as an intrinsic aspect of their evolving cultures and societies. Mamang Dai in an essay "On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives" says:

> Myths and stories can be interpreted as an ancient religion of the world which, over a period of time developed into parables and a set of beliefs…The stories did not come into

> the minds of men like a bolt of lightning. They must have seeped in over the centuries, like a gift of understanding generated by life itself. This is the substance of faith – so many questions remain unanswered, the evidence available is never conclusive, yet the quest for a starting place to define and guide the rest of our journey continues. (6)

Articulating marginality and building a literary paradigm for a North-East discourse in literature studies marks the need to re-narrate "the nation and integrate plural entities into the national consciousness" (Sarma 39). The notion of inclusivity calls for embracing plural entities and to address the question of literary canon, in the context of Indian English literature, by moving towards dissolving "borders and boundaries from absolute categories to shifting spaces where cultures negotiate and deal with each other…seeks to appreciate alternative expressive forms…and takes an interdisciplinary approach to interrogate theories of literature, nation and culture, from alternative vantages" (Sarma 41).

The "inter-disciplinary approach" and "alternative vantages" that Sarma mentions makes texts like *LOP* relevant and necessary to understand the increasingly complex themes of North-East literature that negotiates the challenge of representing the oral past to a contemporary audience. We acknowledge stories from *LOP* such as "on stage" where Dai employs the agency of her characters like Rakut who assists the need to assimilate and forge affinities, across various cultural and literary practices, in statements such as:

> 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 to recognize one another. (191)

> We are peripheral people…Just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts! (190)

2.3 The Narrative of Community: Art of Storytelling in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006)

Sandra A. Zagarell's essay "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre" (hereafter mentioned as NoC) talks about the technique of communistic narrative used by women writers in literary works. Broadly, what Zagarell examines is to identify narratives in literatures that shifts from individual representation to a more collective and community oriented themes. Her theory foregrounds the ways in which the narrative structure of women writers varies from mainstream Western literature. She defines narrative of community as a "powerful literary and theoretical alternative to the overwhelming preoccupation with the self…that genre that takes on their subject the life of a community in its everyday aspect" (499). Zagarell's NoC "portrays the minute and quite ordinary process through which the community maintains itself as an entity" (499). The aim of this section is to take Zagarell's approach of NoC and look at how it relates to the narratives of emerging literary works from the North-East, particularly emphasizing on Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (hereafter mentioned as *THCH*).

This section examines Temsula Ao's debut collection of short stories *THCH* to study how women writers like her and others engage with the narrative of community in the literary works. I take the theoretical approach of Zagarell as an essential interpretative lens through which I closely examine how Temsula Ao's stories are constructed as it responds coherently to the community social and cultural change. This means, using the concept of NoC from the characters perspective to understand Temsula Ao's interpretation of the community's oral myth and histories through the method of storytelling.

Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Janice Pariat and Easterine Kire works reflect narrative structures that embodies a holistic involvement of their individual historical, political and social experiences. Such expression is a new exercise by writers from this region as they work on creating narratives that is close to their community, which simultaneously assist them in re-writing the narrative of history. Writers such as Temsula Ao who experiments with a comparatively new genre, for North-East writers, of writing autobiography also fulfills an act of documenting the cultural and social lives of her community. Her memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014) as a narrative includes an extensive description of the cultural beliefs and ethics of her community. NoC, especially when used by writers from the margins, is an attempt to establish an identity and to assert a sense of belonging as Preeti Gill avers in "Writing the Northeast: Voices from the Margins":

> People whose history and civilization had been pushed into the margins took up the task of recreating their past and reinventing tradition as part of the nationalist agenda of identity assertion. Writers across Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura are deeply concerned about the brutalization of their societies and have been confronting these issues upfront. (2011)

Such narratives of communistic expression, where we see an interplay of the 'self' negotiating and speaking for the community, plays a crucial role in recognizing the culture and tradition of the community. NoC positions the self as an agent to the interdependent network of the community. The use of NoC in the context of North-East India literature is employed with the understanding that the indigenous lives of these individuals exist within and across connected networks of social customs, politics, cultural beliefs and practices. These interrelated networks work closely together where a specific history can lead to a broader, more comprehensive

narrative. Text such as *THCH* portrays people, their collective memories and the shared histories of pain and pleasure. The long standing oral history of the *Naga*[4] community allows writers like Temsula Ao to acknowledge that the art of storytelling is a powerful weapon of subversion, of protest and in shaping reality through language. She expresses this sentiment in her poem "The Old Story Teller":

> So I told stories
> As my racial responsibility
> To instill in the young
> The art of perpetuating
> Existential history and essential tradition
> To be passed on to the next generation. (Ao 33-38)

The ten stories in *THCH* are weaved within the fabric of the rise of the *Naga* political movement among the community. The narrative of the state political insurgency provide the theoretical framework for the stories that act as the avenue of cultural / community representation. This representation executes Zagarell's theory that provides a series of reflections on literary and cultural representation of community. In stories like "An Old Man Remembers" Temsula Ao charts the historical events in the narrative of story by using the method of storytelling. Stories such as this may not necessarily be based on true events but they do represent and relate to the lived experience of the people. In the story, we observe the way Temsula Ao weave the story to suit the oral tradition of a grandfather narrating stories to the young people of past events that integrate the telling of myths and legends. However, here in this story the telling involves a glimpse into the turmoil of Naga history as Sashi the grandfather tells his grandson about his tryst in the early days of Naga nationalism. Similarly, the story titled "The Last Song" follows the oral tradition of storytelling where the narrator is an old woman. In this story Temsula Ao gives

the readers an insight into how the oral form of storytelling is carried out as it narrates, “an old storyteller gathers the young of the land around the leaping flames of a hearth and squats on the bare earth among them to pass on the story of that Black Sunday” (33). However, here too the storytelling only develops to reveal the anarchic operations carried out against the community where Apenyo, a young soulful singer serenades the “arrogant Indian army” (27) as she is raped to death.

In the study of NoC, as reflected in the literature from the North-East, the historical narrative of politics is a topic that cannot be ignored. While themes of indigenous cultural beliefs and practices cover the literary geography, the region’s struggle for sovereignty finds its expression in the literary imagination too. The faithful representation of this literary aspect is visible in Temsula Ao’s text. *THCH* brilliantly executes the lives of everyday ordinary men and women caught in the web of social and political disorder. The stories that are written from a war zone and a period of political upheaval brings into illustration characters of the following kinds: 1) those that self-voluntarily join the factional groups (termed by the locals as undergrounds) driven by a more romantic idealism of the war than of patriotism 2) naive characters who live by the calling of fate and destiny and 3) the ones that unconsciously get involved in situations by engaging with either one of the warring parties. These characters control the plot of the narrative whose presence and activity contributes to the structure of the story. Such dynamic characters that are similarly drawn in the works of Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai or Janice Pariat tells us that the characters they illustrate are more than just creative construction. While these characters illustrate the living turmoil of these communities their very diverse ways of both entering, staying or leaving these conflicts is again representative of the diversity of conflict participation. All of these features make these works both different as well as similar from mainstream Indian postcolonial narratives- and yet they are often viewed only as representations of political

instability. The individual stories of these characters give names and places that sound and feel different and thus compels the reader to acknowledge the literature as at once part of and yet separate from mainstream Indian literature.

Cornered by the social and political chaos in the state of Nagaland in the 1960's and 70's, individuals like Satemba of "The Curfew Man" displays the kind of people in the society who are involuntarily caught between the warring parties. This story centers on Satemba, a former constable in the Assam police and an exceptional football player who unfortunately due to an injured kneecap has to retire prematurely from his job. In Satemba's journey, Temsula Ao carefully centers the political history of the Naga's during the 1940's into the narrative. His job as a "government informer" (37) comes along due to the threat of an SDO rather than a help for his livelihood which he keeps away from the knowledge of his wife Jemtila, until she questions him about the nature of his job that keeps him away for days. A portion from the story that shows the incisive questioning by his wife speaks of the shared history of pain caused by the political anxiety that gradually takes a toll on the domestic and individual lives:

> …she became suspicious and began to ply him with questions. Satemba admitted to her that some nights he did not come home because he got delayed while gathering some vital information for the sahib, which he could do only at night. 'What information?' she persisted, 'and those people you meet, don't they sleep?' He wouldn't tell her at first, but when she threatened to go to the sahib…Satemba had to tell her everything. Jemtila was furious…She also threatened him by saying, 'Just wait and see, one of these days the other guys will come for you.' It was only then that Satemba told her how the sahib made it clear that her continuing in his household depended on his accepting the job. And he added, if she lost her job…they

> would…become a suspect in the eyes of the government and anything might happen to them in these uncertain times. (38)

Similarly, "Shadows" draws the narrative of political anxiety through the characters Imli, Roko, Hoito who joins the underground Naga army at a time when the Naga hills inflamed with an undefined nationalistic fervor. Stories like this tells of the power struggle resulting from a breakaway within the various factional groups. Caught in the "romantic idealism" (76) of a freedom fighter, these individuals eventually lose their life, individuality, and understanding. Imli the son of second-in-command of the underground army develops a fascination over the idea of a freedom fighter. However, in midst of the rigors of the jungle life, he is faced with the foul play of Hoito the unit commander who "always entertained a secret grudge against Imli's father" (74). Narratives such as this are powerful as they speak of the contemporary predicament of the political struggle. They are also particularly important, for oral communities, as the representation of historical events allow writers to re-create history that is encoded in songs and stories.

Scholars such as Tilottoma Misra examine the inevitable position of writers from the region who cannot ignore the political narrative in the literature works. She says:

> The new literature, most of which is in English, has sprung from the staccato cry of the machine guns and reflects the revolutionary ideals of the militants as well the disillusionment with their ways that followed. The course…has also transformed the whole idiom of poetry as well as prose fiction and words with sinister connotations have crept into the vocabulary of common speech. (xxv)

However, such engagement is not to dismiss the thematic range of this body of work as such assumptions can be purely

reductive. The wide range of the writers' use of the oral aesthetic theme is definitely overwhelming. The oral art of storytelling traditions involves a process whereby the traditional folktales and myths are transmuted, retold and transcreated into the literary narratives. Writers and scholars understand orality as an innate feature, which despite its challenges is recognized as a productive platform for exchanging creative consciousness.

Esther Syiem's essay "Social Identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk" bring out an interesting approach to the folk elements that faces contemporary prejudice in the face of an evolving literary society that demands larger narrative of a pan-national discourse. Discussing from the context of the Khasi[5] tribal group of Meghalaya, she stresses on the centrality of the oral tradition among the community that is existent and is practiced in the contemporary society. An important observation by Syiem in her essay is her remark on the culture of oral translation and archiving that is not limited within the written and print culture alone. She states that the homegrown culture is acknowledged, preserved and catalogued through the use of indigenous musical instruments, which is played even today alongside western devices. Syiem's comprehensive outlook on the oral practices of the tribe is also relevant to other tribal community of North-East India who equally develops the oral tradition in art and literature. She states:

> The oral nature of Khasi Society has never completely broke down even in the face of the cultural and religious invasions that brought with them the power of the written script…Although the folk may seem to have been side tracked from its original position of centrality, it can never be recanted, never erased. If at all it has now assumed a position of potent 'invisibility', a hidden strata of creativity mirroring the compulsions of a community. (130-131)

The concept of NoC reflected in the oral form of storytelling creates an alternative community resource that archives the society's collective customs and practices. Such narrative that is new in the mainstream literary space is an emerging framework and a space for literary production. As Siddhartha Sarma says, "The more complicated the scene on the ground, the more fertile the ground is for harvesting stories" (Borpujari 2011). Such process of negation that lead to productive germination invites a similar reading in the fictional narrative of Ralph Ellison's celebrated work *Invisible Man* (1952). The text of Ellison sheds light on some real life riots at Harlem around the 1930's. The limelight of the story revolves around the unnamed narrator who claims himself to be invisible. His creation of invisibility[6] he says is the result of the refusal of others to see him. However, he sees this hidden darkness as a productive area in which he is able to find himself and it is in this 'undefined darkness' that the protagonist realizes the self-ability of his life that lives within him. His marginalization becomes a space for active and creative discovery. Ellison's text is an important reference to look at the marginal space of an individual with respect to the dominant culture and its influence.

Similarly, text such as *THCH* is a useful reminder to continue our engagement with the narrative of indigenous aesthetics. This is important so as to incorporate a wide and encompassing narrative, in literature studies, to regenerate a cosmopolitan and a vivid literary environment that is "heady with energy; [and] distinctively its own" (131). As Syiem says:

> [Oral tradition] liminality has become its strength and it is from this region of partial shadows that it waits to re-emerge in its new avatar, equipped to take on the challenges of a complicated age. (131)

2.4 The Oral Literary Diversity in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012)

Carrying forward the need for identification and inclusion of indigenous literary aesthetics I look at Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (hereafter mentioned as *BOL*) to study the need for literary space and identity. Pariat's debut fiction *BOL* reflects a diverse literary narrative that looks at the region's oral traditions, distinct social structures and linguistic variances. In an attempt to avoid detailing the exquisite indigenous art that is often eyed with 'fascination' Pariat carries forward the indigenous expression towards a more thoughtful literary perspective. *BOL* includes oral narrative of the power of spoken word that forms the cultural beliefs and practices of the Khasi community. In an academic lecture, Pariat talks of the importance of oral tradition by expressing that the spoken word is particularly poignant (to her community, Khasi) as it carries a lot of power, music, mantra, heresy that are evocative to the Khasi people ("Goa Arts and Literary Festival").

Pariat kindles this expression in her works, an example of which is the opening story of the book that opens to a world of infinite possibilities, magic and chants. "A Waterfall of Horses" tells the story of Shillong at the early 1850's. The narrative builds around a small hill village Pomreng that "lay nestled on a bit of greasy flatland, a cluster of fifty huts, ribboned by a river" (4) where the force of colonial rule wrestled with the equally powerful native customs. With the story moving along the tension between the outsiders and the locals, a small trivial incident between the two leads to an afternoon of savage warfare. The violent situation is aggravated further by mantras chanted by a character named Nong Kñia, who in the story is believed to be the "bearer of the word" (12). The deeply entrenched belief of the people in supernaturalism explains the strong conviction of the people who allows the unusual beliefs to govern the mind and soul of the individual / community.

The connotation of the power of the spoken word as explained in the story is mentioned below:

> How do I explain the word?...
>
> For I mean not what's bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally. Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. Old, they say, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the heath, and fall as rain.
>
> We, who had no letters with which to etch our history, have married our words to music, mantras, that we repeat until lines grow old and wither and fade away...How do I explain something untraceable?...Eventually, like all things, it is unfathomable. So, how do I explain? Perhaps it's best, as they did in the old days, to tell a story. (3)

While such supernatural belief is a unique practice of the people, given the oral society they are born into, there are other beliefs and practices that surround the everyday lives of this community. "Dream of the Golden Mahseer" is a mix of history and imagination as it tells the supernatural and magical life of a family whose members survived the Second World War and lived through the 1897 earthquake, an event in history that changed the landscape of present day Shillong. The story takes lights upon a character named Mama Kyn who "didn't talk much and…unlike Mama Heh [the older brother], who was usually tipsy and voluble…cleaned his fishing equipment in silence, rarely taking his eyes off the reel or the fine tangle of angling bait" (69). It so happens that one winter around Christmas he disappears and the only person to know of his disappearance is the narrator, the youngest member of a large household, who spent evening study hours at Mama Kyn room as retribution for his poor performance at school. As words get around the household of his disappearance, they conduct a search only to

find him oddly perched by the *Wah Dieng Doh* waterfall. Interestingly, the community concludes his dwelling by the waterfall as an unfortunate event of having his body and soul seized by the *puri,*[7] water fairy, which is explained in the following statement of the story:

> I was in Uncle Gordon's room watching him smoke a joint.
>
> 'What is puri?' I asked.
>
> 'Hmmm…supposed to be a water fairy.'
>
> 'That's what happened to Mama Kyn? He was taken by a puri?
>
> I got a face full of foul-smelling smoke.
>
> 'Puris trap men and take them away to their dwelling places underwater…old people believe in all that…' he grinned
>
> I learnt more by eavesdropping in the kitchen, 'She must have followed him home from the river. Once that happens, he'll always be under her spell,' said Mena. (74)

Such belief that may seem fantastical binds the daily existence of the community who readily connect to such mystic interpretation of their lives. The latter stories in *BOL* interestingly opens up to contemporary Shillong with the people embracing new changes as we read of the gradual shift of the open wood fires to gas stoves, old shacks giving way to smart cement house etc. However, such changes only assert a strong connection of the people with their beliefs and customs as we see a fallback of the people / community with the oral past. The dependency on the 'wondrous' belief in the spirits is cited in the narrative of a Pariat stories:

> What does it take, I think, to have faith in things beyond the ordinary? Age? Childlike wonder? Is it right to cling so fiercely to the world? As they absorb my solitude, the

> silence of the distant hills and the drifting indifference of the clouds…I am steeped in sadness. Then I notice how the air fills with cicadas, the trees cast their trembling shadows on the water, the reeds bow in steady reverence. I realize that no one is truly ever gone. All voices are heard in a river's murmuring. (77-78)

A final reference to another story from the collection titled "At Kut Madan" serve as an example to the supernatural belief that is not restricted within the indigenous community alone. The narrative tells the story of a young girl named Lucy who is caught by a spirit of dream. This story is particularly important because Lucy in the story is someone who does not belong to the local community but is an outsider. It is also important as it makes the narrative more interpretative in its analysis where the indigenous practices transfers on and aligns with the beliefs of the people outside the region. The story begins post-Second World War in the village named Sohra where Doctor Wallang lives. Despite his medical practice the people of his community often reached out to him for his ancient knowledge of healing, as they recognized him of being more shaman than a doctor. Lucy, the orphaned niece of Mr and Mrs Smithson, on a holiday from England, falls ill in Sohra. Her illness that cause a change in her behavior indicate that her sickness is caused due to *Kem ksuid*, which in the Khasi language means, "caught by a spirit, forced to languish and waste away" (23). Lucy does not find the reason of her aliment strange, despite being an outsider, as during her holidays she learns from her companion Kyntang that, "here [in Sohra] dreams are as important as waking life" (32). Lucy's acceptance of the village myth through Kyntang show how outsiders like her readily welcomes and recognizes the belief of the other. Her involvement with the indigenous myth and beliefs also interprets the traditional beliefs and practices of communities' across the world that finds an association with people of both indigenous and non-indigenous societies.

The portion in the story in which Lucy describes the surreal dream to Doctor Wallang is mentioned in the following passage:

> 'I used to dream of golden eggs…And now, a fire bird.' She turned to him. 'What does it mean? If you dream of being inside a fire bird.'
>
> 'It's what I dream of…floating around there,' she gestured towards the sky, 'A dazzling fire bird comes crashing down to earth, like a star that's burst into a million flames. It drops fast, lower and lower, shrieking loud and clear.' (32)

Although Doctor Wallang dismisses her temperament in the beginning we understand through his thought process that somewhere he continued to believe in the dream of the "fire bird" (32) that signify the harbinger of an event to come. And relevant to his thoughts, soon after Lucy leaves for England, Sohra experiences a catastrophic event that leads to an airplane crash. The next morning in the gathered field the Doctor is left to recall the dream of dazzling fire bird of Lucy, as a familiar voice behind him explains what the flying airplane looked like before it crashed:

> 'From the window…flying across the sky. It looked like…like…'
>
> 'A fire bird,' the doctor thought he heard Kyntang say… (42)

2.5 Rediscovering the Basis of One's Cultural Identity in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014)

Even as writers such as Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat and Easterine Kire look at indigenous aesthetics and literary devices for their creative narratives, they are also cognizant of the continuing and growing influence of globalization (or westernization) that also characterize the society. The regeneration of culture takes place in the form of the unconscious influence of western society that readily

sinks in with the native way of life. We see such influence not only in the narrative of the literary works but also in the way culture and its practices keep transforming. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly states in her essay "The Anxiety of Indianness" where she tells of the ongoing westernization of Indian culture and society and the eventual neglect of Indian literatures with a pressing desire in most writers to draw in western perspective of Indian literature. She raises the crucial issues of Indianness that mark an obsessive concern with the novelists writing in English.

Drawing to the arguments of Meenakshi Mukherjee's seminal essay, I look at the concept of reliving and rediscovering the basis of one's cultural identity, which is an important literary practice for North-East literature expressed in the scholarship of Tilottama Misra, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham S Nongkynrih etc. These writers express the anxiety of cultural reformation, the substance of the region's literary work, which is going through a mire of loss and recovery (Misra xiii) and hence, assert the importance of engaging with the indigenous cultural material of the region. Robin S. Ngangom in his poems works through the theme of the state level insurgency that defines the political narrative of his state he belongs. He remarks on the kinds of narrative writers from the North-East employs which is:

> written with the hope of enthusing readers with my communal or carnal life – the life of a politically-discriminated-against, historically-overlooked individual from the nook of a third world country. (qtd. in Poetry International Rotterdam 2008)

Similarly, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih thematic approach in his works relate to Robin S. Ngangom as he understands the need to involve with the narrative of one's location. He identifies the crucial narrative of the region's politics that cannot be erased in the discourse of the region's scholarship and expresses the writings that

are affected by the tremendous regional challenges– from insurgency to state-sponsored terrorism and negligence, from ethnic cleansing to corruption. Such narrative of negotiating with the challenges of cultural material that is constantly changing is not only crucial in an evolving multicultural society but perhaps affirms the importance of rediscovering the basis of one's cultural identity.

In this section I look at Easterine Kire prize-winning book *When the River Sleeps* (hereafter mentioned as *WTRS*). Based on this text, I assert the argument on the essentiality and continuity of indigenous literary narrative by affirming the importance of its survival and continuity. For this reading, I find Native American narrative to be a useful point of departure. In the introduction to *Yellow Woman* (1993) edited by Melody Graulich, LaVonne Ruoff takes reference to the work of a Native American women writer Leslie Marmon Silko and her emphasis on the need to "return to rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's cultural identity" (20). Silko's statement is important to understand the significance of recovering the native oral tradition as its obliviousness only affirms the limitation of one's understanding of the aesthetics in indigenous literature. Scholars and writers acknowledges the presence of such narrative as we see a growing literary trend that accommodates the indigenous cultural aspects. For example, the recent published works from North-East India such as Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), Mamang Dai *The Black Hill* (2014), the narrative of which are built on a generous and abundant reference to the myths and legends intrinsic to the lives of the natives.

Native American literature includes a vast expanse of oral studies that comes from the continuity of traditional narratives and mythic perception in the form of storytelling. The indigenous community of North-East similarly represents a group of people who exists alongside the deeply rooted knowledge of the communities myths and legends. The literary material for both these

communities that are, in terms of geographical areas, so far from each other yet culturally so in tune comes from the shared histories of a colonial past and the great tradition of story-telling. Some observations I see in the scholarship of both the literature show 1) similar technique carried out in recounting oral stories where the process of narrating a story is formed through multiple telling 2) the oral history that are generally attuned, altered and appropriated to the change in society uncovers a narrative that is closely connected to lived experiences and 3) the concept of validating the oral histories through collective enterprise which affirms the belief that the narrator does not hold singular authority over a story. The idea of collective enterprise that denies the singular authority of the oral narrative is studied through what is known as documenting oral histories which is sometimes referred to as "oral footnoting", a term used by Wendy C. Wickwire in her essay "To See Ourselves as the Other's Other: Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives". The term "oral footnoting" is a method in which the narrator, while documenting the oral histories, is required to document their telling by citing the source of their knowledge, such as a great grandparent or an elder. This documentation is a familiar practice for writers such as Easterine Kire as she acknowledges the oral description of her hunter friends that formed the narrative of her novel *When the River Sleeps*. She says during my interview with her, "I have a set of hunter friends…I use to move with them, listen to their stories. So many of the stories come from them and of course the oral narrators tell me their stories" (Personal Interview).

WTRS tells the story of the Tenyidie[8] tribe whose mythical beliefs and practices is the context to Easterine's fictional narrative of Vilie, a tribal solitary hunter. The book tells the story of Vilie, a hunter who lives a solitary life in the forest and his enchanting travel through the difficult terrain of rocky hills and mountains to find the river of his dreams. The story unfolds as Vilie sets off in search of the river where lies a powerful charm called a 'heart-

stone'- that would grant untold power to the one who claims it. In the enchanting narrative of the book, Easterine situates the fiction in a completely different set-up as she draw us to some of the ancient folk beliefs and practices of the Naga community– weretigers[9] and malignant widow-spirits. The protagonist who takes the role of the informer apprises the readers on the dying art of bark weaving, the knowledge of the seer and the outcaste tribe of his village the *Kirhupfümia*[10] that are existing and relevant to the community. An example of the mythical belief in weretigers from the book is mentioned below:

> Vilie didn't sleep long. The tiger returned…Vilie was quite sure by now that it was a weretiger. The folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers was a closely guarded art. Despite the secrecy, most of the villagers knew who were the men who had become weretigers. He rapidly thought of the names…and called out,
>
> "Kuovo! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace…I am your guest!" He shouted these words out with absolute faith…Sure enough the animal retreated…but not before it had made a call like a warrior's ululating cry as it departed. (25-26)

The mythical belief in the practice of weretigers that is recognized as cultural knowledge by some tribal communities of the North-East is an important delivery and timely inclusion to the literary narrative that for once disallows the region's popular narrative of violence and unrest. Beside the belief of weretigers *WTRS* cover a wide range of indigenous cultural ethics, which is visible in various forms: 1) use of phrases in Tenyidie that represents some aspect of oral resource is untranslatable 2) the

narrative incantations of the widow-spirits and the power of a curse that is close to the communities early practices and 3) the narrative that accompanies expression of the knowledge of universal humanity and the need to be appreciative of cultural pluralism, example of which is echoed in the following lines:

> Because knowledge is always powerful [it is important] to impart knowledge of the natural and supernatural to you so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not [be] disrespectful of either world as some people are. (28)

The literary shift from the oral to the print for the indigenous communities of the North-East India involves more reasons and issues besides the fact that the shift comes from a larger colonial project of educating the indigenous people. The print culture in the region has always been an uneasy and suspicious arrival for the communities who continue to exist in the oral knowledge. While the "infinite, indestructible and fluid characteristic" (Misra 16) of spoken word has long been appreciated and associated to classical Indian culture, orality continues to be dismissed as a subject that often stand in oppositional binaries with the written history as "civilized" and "modern" (Misra 24). Oral form of narrative has often been viewed as the 'other' form of expression that signifies the one who uses it as "barbaric and uncivilized" (Misra 24). While such responses should not limit the literary production of oral literature, contemporary scholars and writers need to look at the oral discourse through which alternate arrangement can be carried out in an otherwise heterogeneous discipline of critical thinking. Such agencies of alternate thinking should help revert the stringent policy of binaries that distinguishes, good versus bad and suggests a more inclusive approach. The argument is clearly explained by Tilottoma Misra in her essay "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India" in which she says:

> the concept of modernity [print culture] need not always be linked with colonial ideology which depicts all traditional cultures [oral] and social institutions as barbaric and uncivilized. (Misra 24)

Christopher B. Teuton, a Cherokee scholar, comments on similar lines with respect to the relationship between European literacy and other ways of communicating in his book *Deep Waters: The Textual Continuum in American Indian Literature* (2010). Teuton observes:

> no form of communication is inherently more clear, present, or "truthful" than another. The privileging of writing as recorded speech has led to the perception that context-dependent forms of signification, such as Native American oral and graphic traditions, are less culturally advanced. This privileging has contributed to the historical and political subjugation of Native communities by characterizing them as oral, non-literate peoples. (xv)

The concept and phenomena of oral art as literature is debated and argued in indigenous studies across the world. The ensuing result of scholars and critics engaging in an attempt to create a network that re-frames and re-defines the meaning of literature has opened various avenues; significantly the recognition of indigenous cultures. The increase in studies of oral narratives also invites many challenges especially in terms of addressing the binary: the oral and the written tradition. First, the concept of an oral literature is an unfamiliar one to most people brought up in cultures that lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition. Second, the concept of oral literature, in the popular view, seems to convey the idea of mystery or that of crude and "artistically undeveloped formulations" (3). A large part of these challenges arises due to the huge vacuum in terms of availability of scholarship that critically engages with such narrative; leading to a

massive misreading of the narrative of myths and folklore. The conception of binary between orality and literacy[11] also called by anthropologists as the "Great Divide" (qtd. in Finnegan 270) privileges literacy over orality. Oral tradition is the basis of most tribal communities of the North-East. The oral tradition that consists of history, religious practices, cosmology, rituals, folktales, myths and narratives etc. are transmitted from generations to generations while simultaneously serving as important narratives that shapes the literary world and works. The functionality of the oral tradition (communities thriving on indigenous beliefs and the significance of oral traditions in narratives of literary works) reflects my argument of allowing ourselves to understand indigenous aesthetics in more complex ways than its exoticism or otherness. Chinua Achebe in his essay "An Image of Africa" assert a similar argument in context to the oral narratives in African literature; the oral traditions having significant functionality and purpose contradicting the mainstream imagination as simply an act of 'cultural' preservation and survival. Irrespective of differences in geography, culture, beliefs and practices, oral literature of all indigenous communities is a medium to educate, preserve history and a system for transmitting important philosophical and moral concepts.

Scholars and critics such as Walter J. Ong, Harvey Graff, Christopher Teuton have long argued and debated on the issues and nature of orature and its narrative presence (in written forms) in contemporary literary works. Harvey Graff in *The Literacy Myth* (1979) addresses the widespread belief in the transforming power of literacy and argues the presence of a pervasive "literary myth" in Western culture. The myth, Graff says, is that literacy translates into economic, social and cultural success and therefore he argues further to state that literary is just one skill / attribute that people need to participate in. Critiquing the idea and concept build upon

the binary of oral and written tradition, Walter J. Ong in his influential book *Orality and Literacy* (1982) argues:

> Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful oral performances of high artistic and human worth, which are [no longer even possible] once writing has taken possession of the psyche. (14)

Contemporary writings from the North-East include stories that contribute largely to the oral account of myth and folklore and therefore, orality serves as the primary thematic structure of the written literature. Scholars Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod states that the "oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory" (qtd. in "Indigenous Foundations"). The dominance of the written word comes from the western discourse that dismisses the oral society to be people without history thereby framing discussions on oral history in binaries: oral / writing, uncivilized / civilized. The creation of binaries by the western counterparts that tend to place authorities on the written document is dismantled by Erin Hanson in an essay "Oral Traditions" where she states that, "such assumptions ignore the fact that authors of written documents bring their own experiences, agendas and biases to their work—that is, they are subjective" ("Indigenous Foundations"). Agreeably so, the divide is a misconception as oral and written are not separate entities but work in complementary to each other. Stó:lō historian Naxaxahtls'i puts it, "The academic world and the oral history process both share an important common principle: They contribute to knowledge by building upon what is known and remembering that learning is a life-long quest" (qtd. in "Indigenous Foundations").

The study of indigenous culture and its inclusion in literary discourse arises from a need to preserve the histories of ethnic culture. Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat, Easterine Kire

writes against the standard of a grand literary narrative as they understand their engagement with the smaller narratives of oral history as a "repertoire of [the] legacy [the writers] wish to cherish as their unique cultural heritage" (Misra 24). This chapter achieves a platform of interacting with marginal themes through the textual analysis of select literary works by arriving at 1) the needed act of locating indigenous concept and 2) building a cognizance towards indigenous narrative expression. This recognition is a major contribution to Indian Writings in English. Esther Syiem acknowledges this through the illustration of a folk story by taking the Khasi community concept of *Ka Nam*, which besides its embedded folktale, also mean the continuity and evolving essence of the oral tradition:

> The oral tradition lives on through individuals whose foundation for living is rooted in the folk wisdom that they have inherited from their ancestors. Hence, *Ka Nam*[12] comes through to us as a symbolic figure of the Khasi woman deeply entrenched in the grain of the telling, transforming herself through the changing avatars of the oral as it continues to infuse life into its own. (141)

Indigenous narrative is yet to find a suitable ground of expression. The challenge is globally shared as Suzzane Benally, a Native American writer, reflects on the anxiety of being marginalized as she says, "I reflect on the many ways my own identify as a Native woman is shaped and how often our Indigenous identity is challenged as we live in integrated ways, and in some cases in complete dispossession of our lands and human rights" ("Cultural Survival 2014"). However, for North-East writers the challenge is twofold as the indigenous literary narrative is first, a contested subject matter as it moves away from how we commonly perceive literature studies and second, the narrative, if at all finds 'space', is exoticized or oranamentalized as an artifact placed within

the closed ‘glass cage’ of museums, which Temsula Ao remarks in her poem “Heritage”:

> I…begin to wonder
> how this magnificent specimen
> came to roost here: was it exchanged
> for a packet of salt, a dose of opium
> or was it simply a booty
> from a ‘punitive’ expedition
> against my people? (Ao 51-57)

Notes

1. The Penan are a nomadic indigenous people living in Sarawak and Brunei. They are one of the last group or tribe, in the South-East Asia region.
2. The Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh belong to an ethnic group that lives by the Siang valley, geographically connected only through limited road links. The literal meaning of Adi is hill or mountain top.
3. The term is mentioned by Tilottoma Misra in her introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays* which is borrowed from Saurabh Dube’s essay “Mapping Oppositions: Enchanted Spaces and Modern Places” in his co-edited book *Unbecoming Modern: Colonilism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities* (2006).
4. The Naga people are an ethnic group of several tribes native to the North-Eastern part of India. They are traditionally an oral society and speak distinct Tibeto-Burman languages. The state of Nagaland officially recognizes sixteen Naga tribes. English is the official language of the state and is used for communication between tribes that speak around sixty native dialects. While Naga cultures share many traits, each is distinct and hence we

agree to what Naga author Ayinla Shilu Ao says, “every tribe could virtually be a nation unto itself”.

5. Khasi here refers to the tribal people of Shillong, Meghalaya. The Khasi community forms the dominant population of the eastern part of Meghalaya and is the only matrilineal society in the North-East region. They call themselves *Ki Khun U Hynñiewtrep*, which in the Khasi language means ‘The Children of The Seven Huts’. The community is known for its rich oral tradition. The related ethnic groups of this indigenous tribe are the Khmers, Palaungs, Was, Mon-Khmers.
6. The unnamed invisible character of Ellison can seem to be as complex as his identity is, which is hazy, within the plot of the novel. However, as we progress through the novel we understand the reason of the character’s desire for a hidden identity. Hiding from the world, living underground and stealing electricity from the Monopolated Light & Power Company, he burns 1,369 light bulbs simultaneously and listens to Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” on a phonograph. However, we understand through the course of the text that his ‘invisibility’ is the ultimate point where he recognizes his self and it is in this ‘undefined darkness’ that the protagonist realizes the self-ability of his life that lives within him.

7. Mama Kyn is portrayed in the story as a keen fisherman who occasionally goes out for fishing in the Um Ïam river. As an avid fisherman, it is only but natural that the story follows this direction of interpretation when the family members says that the spirit of the water, *puri*, followed him home causing him to languish. The story ends with his disappearance for the fifth time and this time he never returns. Before his disappearance, he explains his wandering journey through a dream-like narration as he says, “I am catching Golden Mahseer. They’re all around

me, flying through the air, leaping into water. I reach out, one after another…they lie in my hand like pieces of the sun" (76).

8. Tenyidie is the language that is spoken by the Angami tribe of Nagaland. One among the dominant tribes among the Nagas, people from this community are traditional warriors. Christianity is the major religion. However, the belief of the people continues to govern and revolve around the several supernatural forces that are associated with the life cycles as they regards several objects as embodied spirits, much of which reflects in the narrative of Easterine Kire's *When the Rivers Sleeps* (2014) and *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016).

9. Weretiger is an element that is recognized as cultural knowledge by some tribal communities of Nagaland. The culture of weretiger involves the spirit of a tiger that metamorphoses into a human body. A more detailed explanation to this practice can be looked up from a chapter in *When the Rivers Sleeps* (2014) titled "Speaking to the Tiger."

10. In the glossary of the book it is explained as certain females who are believed to have poisonous powers and are greatly feared. In the story, Vilie happens to stumble upon this village as he goes about seeking shelter for the night. The inhabitants of the village are only females who are considered outcastes by the community due to their malignant power.

11. Literacy here is used in synonyms to written tradition. Although the literal meaning of both the term differs, scholarly articles and critical studies in orature / oral tradition refers and reflects to literacy as the hallmark of civilization. Similarly, the written tradition of a society / community is synonymous of society progressing into literacy. Hence, my use of the term literacy here

and in the ensuing sections of the dissertation indicates the written tradition.

[1212]12.*Ka Nam* mentioned here is the title of a Khasi folk tale that tells the story of a woman victimized by circumstance and at the same time is the image of survival. Briefly told, the tale is as follows: There was once a woman who, heavy with child, saw a cluster of fruit trees upon which grew the luscious *sohphi nam* fruit. She wailed aloud to herself at the misfortune that had brought her there with no one to pluck the fruit for her. Unknown to her a tiger sitting high on the branches, overheard her and volunteered to pluck the fruit for her. He, however, stipulated that, as a reward, he wanted the unborn child for himself. But if the child were a boy she could keep him to herself. She promised her child to the tiger and greedily ate the fruit he gave her.

When the child was born, the tiger received the news from the fox. He went to the village and crouched under the floor of the house, the *khrum*, only to hear the contradictory cries of, it's a girl, a girl, a girl, no a boy, a boy, a boy, being repeated over and over again until he had to leave in disgust. The child whose name was Ka Nam, grew up quickly. Her mother, however, never let her out of sight and never told Ka Nam of her broken promise, until one day when Ka Nam insisted that she accompany her friends to the well. What could her mother do but allow her to go only to be informed later that the tiger had kidnapped her child.

Unknown to all, Ka Nam was brought up as the tiger's daughter performing household chores for him. When he saw that she was old enough to be eaten, he left one morning, instructing her to cook a basketful of rice. There was no curry, however, and this

she puzzled over aloud as she was busy preparing the rice, until a rat darted out of its hole to speak to her. Great was her joy when she found that the rat could talk to her. But her joy was short lived when she heard what the rat had to tell her about the tiger's murderous intentions. However, the rat promised to help her since she had always been kind to her in the past. Hurriedly then, Ka Nam ran off with the rat to the obdurate toad's house, *ka hynroh*, to seek for help. The toad gave her a discarded toad skin to disguise herself with, after which the rat took her to two trees growing close to each other. She told her to climb onto the branches of one and to repeat a chant after her. The trees would then quickly grow upwards to reach the heavens.

Once in heaven, Ka Nam went looking for a job as a menial. Finally the sun took her in and permitted her to stay in a dilapidated shack a little away from the house. Thus did Ka Nam work for the sun disguised in the toad skin. At night, however, she would take off the skin in order to bathe and to comb her luxuriant hair. One night the sun's son U 'Lur Mangkara heard her soft humming and pepped in. The sight that met his eyes was of a beautiful maid busy at her toilette. One night, unknown to her when she was still at her bath, he snatched the toad skin away and threw it into the fire. The result was that Ka Nam had to marry U 'Lur Mangkara. (Further reference to this tale can be looked up at Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's book *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007)).

Chapter 3

Outsider / Insider: Examining the Narratives of Ethnic Violence and Re-narrating the Nation from the Margin

> *Our land was not for sale our land was our plate of rice never to be squandered never to be touched up never to be trimmed down never to be chopped never quartered, never splintered. Not a boundary post to be forced off from the land our ancestors had blest….not a tree to be hacked, not a bush to be harmed.* (75)

- Esther Syiem, *of follies and frailties of wit and wisdom* (2010)

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter challenges the presence of indigenous narratives in literary works which often times is subsumed to metanarratives of political commentary with little attention to its unique literary devices and aesthetics. Taking the assumption forward, the chapter harnesses the problematic concept of 'literariness', which is so much talked and debated by indigenous writers, scholars and critics across the world. I articulate the notion of marginality, identify the oral literary diversity and build a space for literary discourse by examining the fictional works of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat and Easterine Kire. While I address on the need for an inclusion of indigenous literary narrative that presently calls for a wide and serious consideration, I create an approach through my textual analysis a need to be more accommodative towards such narratives that takes into account the social, political, cultural and historical circumstances of the region.

This chapter extends that argument to study the concept of ethnicity and examine its relevance to the tribal community of North-East India, for whom ethnic elements constitutes, expresses and outlines a strong cultural community within fixed geographical boundaries. The above quote extracted from the poem of Esther Syiem gives a succinct and a neat explanation for the discourse of this chapter that underlines a strong ethnic connotation of identity, ownership and belongingness. The chapter lays out the on going inter-regional ethnic violence in the North-East as represented in select literary works with a focus on the discourse of subnationalism and cultural politics in North-East India. The chapter uses Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010), Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti* (2009), *Difficult Pleasures* (2012) and Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012) as examples to examine the above mentioned representation of conflict and cultural politics.

The insider / outsider term in the title of this chapter is demonstrated in the following textual examples: Swami a character in Anjum Hasan's novel *Neti, Neti* reflects, through his narrative representation, the universal situation of an 'outsider' as he states towards the end of the book:

> The only problem we'll have in life…is the problem of where to find parking space. (287)

On the other hand, Janice Pariat in the narrative of the characters', illustrated in stories, exclaims the equally complex existence of the 'insider' as they express their anxiety of belongingness against the larger struggle for identity with the Indian nation:

> Unlike the hills and mist, for us freedom doesn't last a lifetime; it comes and goes on unexpected afternoons. (141)

While there is an emerging consciousness among contemporary scholars, writers and critics in carrying forward conversation on the political unrest and the marginal position of the North-East vis-à-vis the Indian nation, the narrative of inter-regional ethnic conflict is still a sensitive subject matter. Few works from the region such as Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti* and Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* (2002) brings vivid narratives and imageries of the massive geo-political shift in the region that leads to an erosion of migrant communities who remain peripheral within internal discourse of the North-East. The region's political struggle for sovereignty coincides with the ethnic clash of drawing lines between the locals and the outsiders that creates violence in a bid to flush out any form of outside physical and cultural evidences. This further reiterates violence motivated by ethnic hatred and conflict while determining the location of certain group of individuals within the society. Therefore, this study is important to underline a nuance narrative of the region's ethnic violence and simultaneously look at various related research enquiries, mentioned below, that compliments the aim of this chapter: 1) The absence in the conversation of inter-regional ethnic violence in the scholarship of North-East literary discourse 2) approach of contemporary women writers from the region on topics of geographical politics and conflicting situation of the region and 3) how these writers recognize their engagement as an act that goes much beyond a process of self-representation but a way to assert their peripheral literary identity by writing themselves into authorship.

The idea of this chapter comes through my reading of Sanjib Baruah's seminal research on the politics of nationality expounded in his book *India Against Itself* (1999) in which he traces the history of tensions between pan-Indianism and Assamese subnationalism since the early days of Indian nationalism. Baruah brings into focus the insurgency in Assam to explore the politics of

subnationalism, which makes for me an important entry into exploring the ethnic roots of insurgencies in the various other states of North-East India. In a keynote address on a panel discussion on IDP (Internal Displacement in India) Scenario in North-East India, Baruah looks at the region of North-East as South Asia's last settlement frontier. He points out an important remark on how partition intensifies migration and how the heterogeneous spaces created by the frontier encounters migrants and their descendants as 'ethnic others' for generations. Taking forward the study on the crisis of displacement to the attributes of literature studies, I hope to achieve in my textual analysis a clear understanding of the sub-division caused by community of culture and interests. This will aid in developing a cognizant approach towards the migrant other, similar to Baruah's argument, on the need to negotiate for a multicultural existence as he puts it:

> Symbolic reparations, commemorations and public apologies can go a long way in re-imagining places as being more inclusive and hybrid and, stop the politics of belonging from becoming a politics of geographical hate. ("IDP Scenario in NE India")

As complex as the term ethnicity is, I look at it from the point of how it incorporates the idea of ethnic cleansing which involves a systematic forced removal of a group of people / community from an inhabiting territory by a more powerful ethnic group with the intent of making it ethnically homogeneous. However, the forces applied in the process of cleansing is a more subdued act of resistance in the form of coercion, intimidation, and refusal of ownership than how it is usually exercised around the world. Philip Q. Yang in his essay "Theories of Ethnicity" poses two vital questions on the force of ethnicity for scholars involved in considering it as a subject of study. He talks of ethnicity as a

construction that have acquired an extensive level of importance in the contemporary society by citing the various ongoing ethnic divisions, strife and collision taking place globally. The questions he states are:

> What is the nature of ethnicity? Is ethnicity something that is inherited or something that is constructed?
>
> What determines ethnic affiliation or identification? In other words, what is the basis of ethnicity? (41)

To address these questions and contextualize it within the framework of this chapter, I look at the concept of home by defining it as an individual / communities search for identity and location. I address the question of ethnicity by examining the concepts of identity, home / homelessness through a textual analysis of represented lives of the characters and their physical movements. A large part of my analysis of these concepts comes from the experience of the characters lives where I define a reframed sense of what home is in the light of the various forms of displacements as illustrated in the select texts — the period of Second World War, the looming cityscape and the indigenous / ethnic claims. Before moving to a close reading of the select primary texts, the chapter needs to go through a long discussion on the concepts of home, memory and belonging and the women writers' approach to the topic of inter-regional ethnic violence. This is important and necessary to demonstrate and illustrate the varied mainstream postcolonial discourse of these concepts and to see how it relates or differs from the North-East discourse.

3.2 Re-Examining the Various Concepts and Definitions of Home, Memory and Belonging

> *[Home is] a theme as ripe for picking as a sun-drenched mango for many writers in the Indian Subcontinent.*

- Janice Pariat, “Of Home and Belonging” (2011)

In an article titled “Of Home and Belonging” Janice Pariat attempts to understand the idea and definition of ‘home’ through the lens of select Indian photographers. She aptly quotes the familiar words of Charles Dickens notion of a home, “Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration” (qtd. in “Of Home and Belonging”). She further adds to it that home is, “a word that holds within itself a lifetime of spaces, familiar rooms and faces…the freedom of rootlessness, and the security, no matter what how fleeting, of belonging” (“Of Home and Belonging”). Pariat also brings in the concept of home that differs for some individuals who find themselves caught in the alteration of the nation map, where their ‘once home’ is marked with drawing of new boundaries and new nations. This she relates to Pablo Bartholomew’s, an Indian photographer having close association with the Naga community of North-East, interpretation of home for whom home is as elusive and as tricky as one would like to call it as he says:

> So many places one can call home, and then none of them really qualify. What can a double refugee’s kid really call home? At best, home could be the place one was born. (“Of Home and Belonging”)

Hanadi Al-Samman’s essay “Border Crossings” on cultural collision and reconciliation bring a different approach to the reading of diasporic theory. To explain her understanding of Hanan Al-Shaykh’s book *Only in London* (2001) Hanadi Al-Samman maps out the hyphenated identity of three individuals who moves from their homeland Dubai to London to seek freedom from personal, political and restrictive sexual norm. Hanan Al-Shaykh’s characters move from their native homeland and travel across continents in the course of which they negotiate multiple identities that offer them a

freedom of living life on terms not available at home. Although the plot is created, in such a manner, in which her characters makes their own choice of crossing the borders of one's home, Hanadi Al-Samman goes on to reflect the angst of an 'outsider' which, often times relates to a struggle between the self and the other. She explains about the imagined freedom of an outsider:

> This imagined freedom is crushed when the characters fail to escape from the…internal / external, minority / majority cultural paradigms that lock their identities in the fixed molds they initially sought to demolish. (20)

I look at Hanadi's essay to achieve and understand the varied forms of how people negotiate with multiple cultures as they struggle to associate themselves with new identities and experiences. While for some individuals the diasporic identity is a continual struggle in assimilating cross-cultural activities, there are some for whom de-centering the concept of home and adopting a flexible citizenship means to celebrate the marginal space. Scholars like Homi Bhabha acknowledge such forms of self-acceptance as he defines the marginal space as a or the boundary from where presencing begins (13). This ability to see one's liminal space as a point of departure comes with, 1) the acceptance of one's history 2) the need to develop his / her marginality as a medium of re-defining the complexities of history and politics that is often negated.

In the same essay, Hanadi Al-Samman refers to Susan Friedman's theory of "routes produces roots and routes return to roots" (qtd. in Samman 19). In my study of examining the narratives of insider / outsider, Susan Freidman's statement on "routes produces roots" comes close to the explanation of how the drawings and redrawing's of borders and boundaries challenges the life of an outsider. The relation of an outsider to Friedman's theory is that in the individual struggle of a finding a

location / home, in the challenging circumstance of geographical change, he begins to assimilate into the dominant culture irrespective of being denied an identity. I examine this process of assimilation to understand, from the novel's characters' perspective, how the social, cultural acceptance and development takes place within an individual in a space that is not his / her native homeland.

The act of shifting through geographical landscapes also involves a process of emotional assimilation and therefore, memory plays a crucial role in examining the history of a dislocated identity. History incorporates forms of memory, discovery, collection, organization, presentation and interpretation of information of these events. Temsula Ao in her preface to *These Hills Called Home* (2006) states that "Memory is a tricky thing: it picks and chooses what to preserve and what to discard" (ix). Scholars and critics from the region such as Tilottoma Misra consents with Temsula Ao by acknowledging memory as an important approach used in the narratives of the literary works as it allows to "form the basis of all the 'truth' that it may represent" (306). Misra relates this to the concept of delayed representation that redefines the concept of memory:

> Delayed representation of traumatic experiences, which allows the memory to pick and choose what it desires to remember rather than recount every experience as it happened in the past, is a characteristic feature of all representation of violent events. (306)

Similarly, Urvashi Butalia's work on the narratives of memory carried out in her partition studies explains the process of remembering. In the comprehensive introduction to her edited book *Partition: The Long Shadow* (2015) Butalia defines the contentious act of remembering and forgetting by referring to the Palestinian

commemoration of its history of homelessness, refugeeism and violence. In examining the notion of home, belonging and territoriality she poses the inevitable question of "how do we move forward and not carry this history with us, but also transcend it? Is it even possible?" (x). Similar to the approach of memory expressed by Temsula Ao and Tilottoma Misra, Butalia also states that, "Depending on where you are place and which perspective you approach them from, acts of remembering and forgetting can mean very different things" (viii). This point relates to the essay of Paramita Prajna Parasher titled "A Long Walk Out From Partition" that perceives memory as an act of traumatic experience for some individuals whose form of lost is "not only homelands, and families, and material things but much more that could not be articulated, sometimes not even named" (viii).

Butalia explains the trajectories of memory by reflecting on the process of recalling events of past where each story is told and retold in varying conversations in the event of which history becomes a series of convoluted events of the past. Just as how borders and boundaries are constantly drawn and redrawn disowning the location of a group of people, memories too become more complex and acquire more nuances and layers. She says:

> as their stories recede, ways of remembering also change, the filters through which such memories are passed on – now begin to shape how they are passed on…[and] for generations who will not have the direct experience of having lived through violence…can only know that history through the multiple ways in which it is handed down to us. (viii-ix)

The layers of memory reflect the role of history as a transient process that is interpreted through various contexts. Rita Kothari's reflection on the Sindhi community, before her experience

with the communities of Banni in Kutch, of their struggle with migration and loss of home, explains to us the most concerning and an eventual sense of acceptance where the history of the community is conclusively ignored. The process where history is forgotten, ignored or interpreted through multiple ways creates conflict and disorder leading to societies categorization of insider / outsider. Just as Butalia says in her concluding remark on partition and its seven decades of history that still remain unresolved and which cannot be left ignored, it is only obvious that the problem of ethnic assertion in some states of North-East India, created with markings of new boundaries, should be able to address, if not all, some aspect of the Indian experience.

While the period of partition addresses cross-border migrants and division of province, the ethnic conflict to flush out the non-residents in some states of the North-East often comes along through contrasting factors such as 1) the conflict emerging as an emotionally charged and a polarizing issue for the inhabitants and 2) the anti-immigrant approach activated or fuelled politically by some section of the native population. I take example from the politics of citizenship in Assam where the state takes responsibility in offering 'political asylum' to migrants. Such provision creates an ambiguous condition where the idea to identify migrants is intermingled in the state's political affair of which Sanjib Baruah expresses in his essay "Partition and the Politics of Citizenship in Assam". In his observation of the Assam politics Baruah states, "A certain amount of ambiguity is probably unavoidable in any talk of asylum and refugees" (79). With the term refugee being descriptive, he also mentions how Western countries give a very limited definition of the term so as to situate the migrants within some restrictive criteria and therefore restrict the influx of such. However, such strategic explanation of the term used by the west contradicts the view of the Assam policy makers whose process of

administering citizenship to the migrant / outsider is largely involved with the state politics. The politics of citizenship in Assam exemplified in the essay is not to draw conclusion to the anxiety of borders and margins of the migrants existing in the other states of the North-East region. The reference to the migrants' in Assam is to give an idea of similar problems around the world that has turned into a violent regionalist and sectional tussle between the natives and the outsiders. The period of 1947 partition reflects a complex period of history and has its own political standpoint that invite uncertainty alongside individual lives that survives on social and political doubt and confusion. Scholars of Social Sciences states that the nation's historic period of 1947 is an act that involves much more than the drawing of lines and shifting of provinces, the exact expression being, "the notion of partition [is rejected by historians] as a single decisive one-time event" (Baruah 81).

While there are various definitions, interpretations and narratives of the 1947 partition, for the North-East region the implication of home and identity created by borders and boundaries has always been a gradual, violent, conflicting and an ongoing process. Adding to which is the conversation on topics of evasion, neglect and a lack of acknowledgement associated to a marginal space that is visible partition narrative as well. Anindita Dasgupta's book *Remembering Sylhet: Hindu & Muslim Voices from a Nearly Forgotton Story of India's Partition* (2014) is a response to the absence of the Sylhet partition narrative as against the extensively researched narratives of the shifting of Bengal and Punjab provinces. The contribution of this book lies in the fact that it throws light on an important topic of similar territorial change of Sylhet separation from Assam that fails to appear in the large-scale discussion of history at the event of 1947 partition of the subcontinent. This is just one example out of the many other scholarly works that defines how the loss of home and identity and

its ensuing violence begins with events of history that deny voices to smaller narratives.

The idea of reconstituting the physical space of home to an abstract notion has constantly been defined in literary studies. Homi Bhabha in his essay "The World and the Home" draws the concept of "unhomely" (141) giving it a new context to the idea of homelessness. In another of his essay "Halfway House" he questions the idea of home and an individual relationship to its physical space. He states, "What does it mean to be at home in the world? Home may not be where the heart is, not even the hearth…Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival" ("Halfway House"). For Bhabha the state of homelessness is not the lack of physical space or the absence of it, it is the 'expression in the sense' that your home is not yours. I establish a similar argument in the textual analysis of Anjum Hansn's novel *Neti, Neti* where the struggle to identify home or the need to place certain characters / individuals within some physical space is achieved only in the mind. This cognitive acceptance of home in the form of an ideology relates to Bhabha's metaphorical representation of home as a mental space that can signify anxiety, or terror of closed space in which the home no longer remain the domain of domestic life, as he cites Toni Morrison lyric from her novel *Home* (2012), "Whose house is this?...Say who owns this house? It is not mine…Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?" (141). Bhabha's idea of "unhomely" or homelessness can be understood in relation to postcolonial studies that provide plenty theoretical support to its numerous key issues that includes home, identity, location, diasporic space, gender, border, boundaries among many others. However, his argument of the term moves deeper into the recesses in fictions where the concept of homelessness is (more than the postcolonial experience) "[the] powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions" (142). This

historical contradictions and the alteration of historical events create a displacement that fails to provide a defined space, the lack of which is never questioned as Bhabha cites the "unhomely" stirring and the condition of being colored in South Africa from a section of Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story* (1990) where Will (the narrator) tells, "halfway between…being not defined – and it was this lack of definition in itself that was never to be questioned, but observed like a taboo, something which no-one, while following, could ever admit to" (21-22).

In the literary works of North-East, history forms a crucial narrative to the texts thereby affirming its content that moves beyond an imaginative construction. The conjunction of history and fiction is important for these writers in order to engage the fictional narrative with events of history that develops through the process of memory. This method of using memory as an art form in contemporary works of fiction is reflected in Salman Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands" (1992) where he talks about the role of history and memory in the narratives of home. Similar patterns of history and memory for writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat or Anjum Hasan who are not necessarily diasporas, as it is with Salman Rushdie writing of 'home' India in North London, moves along the same form of reminiscence / recall of small images of a place that is home. Rushdie explains how he was haunted by the "monochromatic memories of his home, just as they appeared in a picture careless of its "real" colors, until he realized he was writing from memory and about memory, trying to retrieve moments as if untouched by layers of new moments and new memories" (47). Rushdie's description of his relation to history, memory and home is a conscious construction in an attempt to achieve an aesthetic voice of 'belongingness' as he further states:

> I went to visit the house in the photograph and stood outside it…The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white, and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind's eye; now my other two eyes were assaulted by colours. (9)

3.3 Unrestricted Voices from the Periphery: Beyond the Normative Literary Spaces

Narratives of contemporary literary works from the North-East, alongside the presence of ethnic cultural narrative, include discussion on topics of violence resulting from the political tussle of ethnic contention between two groups of people that inhabits the land. What we see in such works are narratives that exemplifies two kinds of lives, 1) the lives of outsiders who suffer geopolitical shift resulting out of the history of colonial invasion and 2) the insiders suffering psychological injury by harboring the feeling of being twice colonized caused due to the distortion of the nation map in 1947, where for few their once 'home' is marked by drawings of new boundaries. The portrayal of such narrative by women writers from the North-East is a significant foray in a society that has been silenced by a neurotic fear of political violence.

The challenges of women in numerous spheres (ranging from her roles in the society, literary, politics etc.) are well known. In the literary circle, the writers' have, to an extent, established a ground to express their voice in diverse ways examples of which are the select works written in pseudonym such as The Brontë Sisters, Mary Ann Evans, Joanne Rowling etc. Similarly, in the scholarship of Indian literature we see scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha who establishes a strong tradition of women's writing from ancient to contemporary history and contextualize the writings of Indian

women by describing the complex evolution of India's multi-dimensional culture. While the idea is to drive home an important point in identifying the literary space of Indian women writers, it is equally important to recognize the kinds of narrative techniques exercised by the writers. Jasbir Jain talks of gender difference in writing in her book *Gender and Narrative* (2002) in which she says:

> Men and women had different kinds of experiences. The manner of contextualizing, analyzing and communicating is also different. Social locations, roles, inherited strength [and constraints] were different. Even the manner in which history constructed them or cultures negotiated through them was different…Words, memory, relationships all have been invested with different kinds of meaning in women's narratives. (xi-xii)

With the present active literary involvement by women writers across the world, experimenting with genres and sub-genres, it is interesting to take note of writers who are leading the way into unexplored territory. One of the interesting qualities of the women writers from the North-East is the unrestrictive voice that appears in the narratives of their works, despite the peripheral space they occupy. Part of this privilege comes from the way culture and tradition shapes their position within the spaces of their home and society, as it is evident in scholarship of such work. The celebration of such spaces is an emerging field of inquiry for scholars who examine the privilege position of the women through the available archived materials. For example, the considerable privileges from the Ao-Naga worldview illustrated by Lucy Zehol in her book *Women in Naga Society*[1] (2002). However, my analysis here deals with the women writers' engagement in their literary works and how they address to the region's topical issues of politics and violence. While writers such as Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire,

Mamang Dai and Janice Pariat, to mention a few, deals with the narrative of regional politics in the fictional works, Indrani Raimedhi's expression on the activity of women's writing that defines their individuality is worth taking note of. She says, "For us, writing is not a leisurely, fashionable, and frivolous pastime… writing is a fiercely subversive activity, an anti-establishment stance against everything I consider unjust and deserving of my critical gaze" ("Male Portrait V^2").

The new literary avatar put forward by women writers in their works have led to a more modernistic and a less conservative outlook. Challenging the normative literary structure that revolve around familiar themes of home and society, contemporary women writers from the North-East have overthrown such singular narrative by carrying out discourse on larger and a more relevant topic of history and politics. Monalisa Changkija establishes this shift as she speaks of the thematic engagement by women writers from the North-East that challenges the limited narrative by dealing with larger and more universal issues. She says, "[Women writers from the North-East] don't always write about our victimhood… We don't always write about ourselves, we also write about numerous issues that are not necessarily gender-centric. We have an increasing number of Northeast women writers writing tomes on history, literature, economics, environment, ethnicity, identity — the list is inexhaustible ("Finding Our Lives"). Such engagement comes from a deep-seated understanding of one's history as they look back into the past that shapes their current literary context. Mark Freeman's theory of rewriting addressed in his book *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (1995) states the significance of rewriting history. His primary purpose in rewriting is in the pursuit of deep truths about human condition. Although Mark Freeman's idea of rewriting is a closer study of interpretive psychological inquiry drawing on 'lifes' autobiographers, I look at his concept of

rewriting as an act that explores the process through which an individual reconstructs the significance of past experiences, which relate to Temsula Ao or Easterine Kire's narrative exercise.

The topic of the political tussle between the center and the individual state is not a new narrative for the women writers from North-East. However, the recent engagement on topics of inter-regional ethnic politics by these writers' have brought to light various issues that are overlooked in the midst of the political, social, cultural and economic struggle of assimilating into the Pan-Indian nationalities. The ethnic politics that involve flushing out the migrant invites an attention to look at the elusive nature of home and belonging. Writers such as Anjum Hasan, Easterine Kire and Janice Pariat foregrounds in their writings the angst of tribal conflict that draws a complex scene of non-resident joys and fears in a space that holds hostage to a politics of fear. The brilliantly illustrated characters in each of their works throws light on the narrative of ethnic conflict existing in the individual state thus, bringing into study the violent ethnic hostility of Nagaland and Meghalaya as represented in the texts. Before looking at the textual analysis, it is important to note here that the angst of tribalism in these states comes from the several secessionists, seditious streams that exist in the common struggle of attaining sovereignty. The struggle for autonomy thereby creates a sense among the natives to disconnect from the outsiders hence, instigates hatred towards each other. In the light of such attributes, I analyze how the acts of state sponsored terrorism is represented in the works as it tries to cover a coherent narrative of incorporating some vital periods of history.

3.4 History of a Splintered Identity: Re-Staging the Forgotten History of Nagaland in Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010)

> *I open the diary slowly. The childish scrawl of a young girl…I am drawn irresistibly, into that mad whirl of living,*

> *dying and loving. That was the war I knew. I had thought then that life began at seventeen…the world was green…the hills bathed with mist…and the nights velvet with the songs of Bing Crosby. How little I knew of life then.* (2)
>
> - Easterine Kire, *Mari*

Easterine Kire's *Mari* is a book that offers a clear, substantial knowledge in understanding the history of splintered identity in the state of Nagaland. The narrative of the story is based on the North-Eastern state of Nagaland covering the period 1943 onwards that marks an important period of history leading to a massive massacre of the state in terms of divisions of land and conflict in ideologies. *Mari* tells the story of the Japanese invasion of India and its ensuing war that created new geographical borders and boundaries in the area inhabited by the Naga tribal community, which then was under the British colonial rule. The narrative of *Mari* dates back to Kohima, 1944 that records an important period of history— World War II. The need to emphasize the period of 1944, Second World War is to map out an understanding of how the feeling of prejudice towards outsiders began in the region. The narrative of the book, as explained in the prologue, is recovered and re-told by the author from an old diary discovered by Mari in the attic of her home. Therefore, the narrator Mari is not a fictional character but the maternal aunt of Easterine Kire who lived through the period of war and hence, the story passed on partially through the diary and orally to the author. The prologue narrates the memory of the historic event as it brings a naive and sensitive retelling of an unpleasant history as Mari narrates:

> this hour of closure when daytime sounds recede and memories crowd in like moths to flame. Memories that mingle joy and grief, light and darkness. More on some days and less on others…Only we who have seen the war feel this

> way. We relive it again and again…I am drawn once again, irresistibly, into that mad whirl of living, loving and dying. That was the war I knew. (1-2)

The text covers from 1943 to 1998, which gives a picture of the British colonized state of Nagaland to the nation's post-independence period in which the idea of freedom, ironically, seats uncomfortably in its nation-state. The reason for this is the large-scale social, political and economic exclusion by the center towards the people of the region. This negligence resorts to a situation where the tribal community seeks for an alternative available support from the other forces that exist in the region. In *Mari* Easterine draws us to such narrative where Anyie, the paternal aunt of Mari, exclaims her assurance on the colonial British rule as the Japanese force begins to invade their lands and homes:

> The white man's government is too powerful to let that happen. Remember how hard our clansman fought the British when they first came? Our best warriors fought the white man…And still we were crushed. (6-7)

Or the following statement:

> We had such faith in the British government that we didn't believe it could be defeated by any other nation. The British had always protected us and our land. (54-55)

To understand such selective sentiments of the natives towards a certain group of outsiders, it is important to look at the history of the region. The state of Nagaland migrated to its present location in the 10th century B.C. The indigenous social and cultural pattern of the community responds to their earlier geographical location that lived in isolation in the hills until British colonialization in the 19th century. While the indigenous Naga community demand for sovereignty and total freedom in any form

remain, various opportunities that came along for development created a less hostile relationship between the native Nagas and the British rulers. For example in *Mari*, the Corps Royal Engineer issued invitation to civilian contractors to build the new roads as "large number of young men and women from Kohima village…took up construction work…The British Army Engineers were employing local Naga contractors to build new roads" (20).

However, the splintered identity in the state of Nagaland came along with the end of the war and the attainment of the nation's independence. This generated a hostile relationship among the native as the self-governing indigenous social, political and economic institutions see a replacement against their will. Such new beginnings for the native population directed them to question the notion of home and identity further leading to an anarchic confrontation between the Nagas and the Indian army. Few sections in *Mari* brings light to the emerging period of Naga political unrest between 1946-1956:

> How quickly the tension of the war years [war between the Japanese and British forces that changed the entire landscape of present day Kohima] disappeared. But in our hills the peace was uneasy…Father and his friends were frequently in deep conversation about the political changes that would soon take place. The British government was moving out, they said, and India and Burma would become independent countries. (127)
>
> Things were moving rapidly…It was around this time [1956] that there was political unrest in Nagaland. Letter from home were full of the tense situation and about the Indian army's killing of many Nagas who were fighting for independence from India. (143)

The geographical connect of the region with the Indian nation through a narrow strip of land referred to as 'The Siliguri Corridor' created in 1947 gradually developed an unreceptive attitude among the natives due to opposing ideologies. The conflicting ideologies and the resultant exclusion in the larger discourse of the nation led them to develop a feeling of being twice culturally marginalized, 1) the British colonial invasion of 1832 and 2) the geographical dislocation post-independence that created a distance from the traditional indigenous social and political ideology. Easterine Kire expresses a relevant narrative in her poem "After reading "Wounded Knee":

We were proud and we were true

A race of men like you

We, too, were once, free

Children of those spaces

Of sky and mountain range and rock-bound river

Bequeathed us by the Great Sprit of these hills

The white man came

And then the brown man came

And fifty years it has been now

That they have been telling us

We are not our own. (Kire 1-11)

For the people of Nagaland, the feeling of prejudice towards outsiders reveal a slightly different character of which we see in text such as *Mari* that responds to this complex nature of inhibition. As illustrated in *Mari*, the ethnic assertion in the state of Nagaland

shows an aversion that emanates from a more nationalistic goal with the conflict having its beginnings around 1946, a period that reflects the growing political consciousness and wisdom among the tribal people. This consciousness led to the development of various violent events such as, 1) the demand of sovereignty from the Indian nation and 2) the uprising of insurgent bodies that gradually failed due to an extensive ideological difference between the factional bodies. *Mari*, to me, is a text that well presents a significant political history of the Naga community that largely affected individual lives through several acts of displacement. I take note of the different agencies of displacement in the transposition of characters and shifting of homes taking place in both the personal and societal space. A few significant scattered narrative concerns in the texts is mentioned below to substantiate the notion of how the invasion of personal space creates fear, animosity and neglect towards the non-natives and hence, generating a feeling of distrust towards any outside force:

> March 1944: It was wonderful to be engaged to *Victor*…But when March came, the situation as very different. News arrived that the Japanese were just days away from Kohima...On 30 March 1944, he took my younger sisters to Chieswema, seven miles from Kohima. They stayed there with an uncle of ours. *Zhabu* and *Aneiü* had been taken…twice before when word arrived that the Japanese had entered the eastern part of our lands. But after things quietened down, they were brought back to Kohima (45-46)
>
> 3 April 1944: …we heard the loud roar of guns and the sound of grenades and bombs exploding…How shocked we were to see the whole of Kohima ablaze and covered with thick black smoke…We stood there, transfixed…It was paradoxical that a village that had offered refuge to others

should now be worrying about seeking refuge itself…(56-57)

5 April: It became apparent that the Japanese were going to stay on in the village. So the villagers prepared to leave…We set out for the forest and walked on till we…found a cow-shed…This little cow-shed became our next home and we tried to make ourselves as comfortable as we could…(61)

14 April: After Easter Sunday our food supplies ran low…Food was the main topic in all our conversations. We rarely talked about other things. Just food and shelter…The whining of plane engines overhead, the incessant sound of shelling, these were the sounds that had become a part of our lives now. If there was a lull in the firing, we would all stop working and strain our ears, waiting anxiously for it to begin again. The shelling felt normal to us, the silence abnormal. (71-73)

While *Mari* illustrate the creation of borders and its aftermath in the state of Nagaland, it is important to also understand the singular narrative (social, cultural, political) of the individual state in the North-East. Preeti Gill explains the specific political narrative of Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam in her essay "Women in the Time of Conflict":

In Nagaland and the Naga-dominated area of Manipur, the conflict is based on their refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Indian state; while in Mizoram it was the neglect and apathy of the Indian government's response to the devastating famine of 1959…In Manipur and in Assam, strong ethnic rivalries have played a major part in the violence and insecurities that has engulfed in the region. In

> Tripura the insurgency has erupted over land tenacity rights…The fear of being swamped by immigrant Bengali settlers who have come across the border is a very real one [similar animosity of which is present in the state of Meghalaya]. (215-215)

Mari also brings to light a crucial gap that exists in the scholarship of North-East literature which is, the absence of the region's history in the academic discourse. What I observe in my close study of literary works such as this is a certain erasure of important historical narrative, for example the history of Second World War in *Mari*. Interestingly, the writers' takes note of such exclusion as they unreservedly prompts the readers to the forgotten narrative. Easterine make a note of this in the author's note section of her book *Mari*:

> Once upon a time, a war was fought here and it changed lives. The lives of those who died. And those who lived, whose loved once never returned, the ones who had to find within themselves the strength and courage to rebuilt, to forgive, to love and to celebrate life again. (xiii)

To identify and acknowledge the history of a marginal space means to rethink Homi Bhabha's definition of the marginal territory as a place of disseminating knowledge that allows in redefining and reshaping the border where, discourse is often restricted within its limiting space. This process of re-invention, re-telling and re-staging the history is formed out of an important question of why the historical narrative of North-East needs to be re-told and why writing from the periphery is essential. The storyline of *Mari* presents a sensitive recounting of a true story, in terms of both the historical and personal narrative. While the book draws us to the historic battle of Kohima, Mari, the aunt of Easterine, also narrates her story of personal loss and experience. The underlined events

that involve personal and political implication address clearly the question of home through the shifting and movements of geographical boundaries. In *Mari* the prejudice feeling comes through various factors such as the invasion of home, the outsiders (the Japanese force and the Indian army) and relocation of space. Such dislocation and relocation is important to take note of as it defines the creation of the smaller but significant narratives of inter-regional ethnic tension that delimits the existence of specific group of people such as the displaced characters of Anjum Hasan.

3.5 The Migrant Discourse in Anjum Hasan's *Neti Neti* (2009) and *Difficult Pleasures* (2012)

Rakhee Kalita in her essay titled "Beyond Borders and Between the Hills" explains the tension of ethnic clash in the North-East, that probes a vital inquiry of "Whose Hills are these Anyway". The essay brings out an important concern on border issues that requires mentioning here as she says, "Cultural borders need to be redrawn as shifting political boundaries and contested identities of race, geography and gender overtake known maps and communities gets reconstructed" (117). In the fiction works of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti* and *Difficult Pleasures* the concepts of reconstruction and relocation takes place on a new climate of violence. The narrative of both these texts open up to a complex scene of non-resident joys and fears in a space that holds hostage to a politics of fear. *Neti,Neti* locates the readers to the North-East state of Meghalaya where the tussle of ethnic claims is clear in the violent struggle between the outsider and the insider. It is important to note here that the political history in this region differs from the other states of the region, where violent activity is essentially based on the demanding need to control and regulate the entry of mainland Indians or outsiders into the state. While it is only apparent that this political mobilization is an indirect force towards absolute demand for sovereignty from the

center, the urgent ethnic riot in the state invites for now a disturbing political and social climate.

While writers like Hasan offers a nuanced view on the lives of the outsiders by narrativizing the migrants live through her works, especially *Neti, Neti* in which the inter-regional ethnic conflict is based in Shillong, writers from the state such as Esther Syiem and Janice Pariat expresses their view towards the migrant communities. These writers offer a mixed-feeling towards such inter-regional violence as they define the 'invasion' of space through multiple acts of conquest and not just the state demand for sovereignty such as, 1) British colonial occupation, 2) division of borders post-independence and 3) the influx of migrants into the state. However, few conscious scholars from the state attempt to understand the complex existence of outsiders, also referred to as non-tribal in Meghalaya. Janice Pariat in an essay states, "ethnicity as a basis for identity is hugely flawed" ("The Bad Old Days"). She relates this statement to the existing violent regional ethnic conflict while also examining the apprehensive attitude of the locals towards the outsiders in her hometown Shillong. She says:

> Some people fear that 'outsiders' will come, take over their lands, compete with them for jobs and even the affections of women, and generally make life more difficult for those who claim to be 'sons of the soil'. There is a fringe extremist element that holds and perpetuates these fears in many places in the world. ("The Bad Old Days")

Pariat notion of "pure" races is pure myth ("The Bad Old Days") throws light on the question of ethnicity that is agreed by scholars and critics as a product and a creation of the human minds and sentiments. This perhaps answers the two fundamental question of the nature of ethnicity of Philip Yang, stated earlier in this chapter. The close textual reading affirms that while ethnicity

traditionally defines an individual legacy to his land, culture and identity such cultural affiliation in contemporary cosmopolitan society cannot serve as fixed markers, nor can it draw absolute categories of a person's ethnic race. While scholars have anticipated the fundamental of ethnicity to eventually make its departure with society becoming more industrialized and modernized, what is more apparent is that the very nature and basis of ethnicity tells of its permanence as scholars look at it as, "a vital and important part of contemporary life, [and its significance] been on the ascendance at certain times and in certain places" (Yang 41).

The cultural baggage of the natives of Shillong and their resistance towards the outsiders who are the settler non-tribal communities creates an anxiousness among the natives, resulting in an ethnic riot. Patricia Mukhim's article titled "Politics of Identity and Location" looks at the difficult existence of the outsiders in Meghalaya as she maps out the complex situation of the non-tribals in the state. Referring to the period of 1970's that mark the beginning of dominant local pressure groups and the vulnerable position of the other, a direction to the historical narrative is crucial before examining the narrative of Anjum Hasan's texts. She says:

> the non-tribals who have lived in the region for three to four generations…have contributed their mite to the local economy. In Meghalaya, in the late 1970s, the Khasi Student Union – a body that is anything but student-like… – launched an insidious attack on the Bengalis[3] living in Shillong. Their reason for doing so is simplistic – the non-tribals are responsible for all the ills that afflict Khasi society. So attractive was the slogan, Khasi by birth, Indian by accident. ("Politics of Identity")

Similar narrative is visible in the narrative of *Neti, Neti* as communal violence affects the life of an outsider. I bring an

example here on the critical evaluation of Sophie, an outsider, from the text:

> Sophie did not find it hard to believe things had changed from the time her father, out during a curfew imposed after a riot between the local Khasis and the settler Bengalis, had been slapped in the street…From the time groups of boy part of a protest going past their house had shattered their window panes…From the time Sophie had been asked to give up her seat on a bus because it wasn't her seat after all, or her bus, or her town. (214)

The Vedic translation of the title *Neti, Neti* meaning "Not this, Not this" informs us of the negation and uncertainty of the space that the protagonist of the novel is caught in. Sophie Das, the protagonist (twenty-five year old of a Bengali father and an unassuming Punjabi mother) moves between two geographical spaces Shillong and Bangalore, neither of which she belongs to. Her attempt in trying to establish some connection to the place and people only leads to complications when the surrounding atmosphere denies freedom in the city (Bangalore) she lives in, and on the other hand the difficult acceptance of her family members who negates and denies expectation from the place they live in (Shillong). For an individual like Sophie one can see that there is clearly no question of trying to probe the authority as it only ultimately strongly asserts her position of an outsider. While the search for "territorial recognition"[4] is fairly usual for some individual whose demographic shuffle is based on geographical shifting from one state to the other, the migrant community who arrives with a purpose of negotiating a space is not well-received by the natives and nor do they fit well in the overwhelming tribal culture and politics.

Sophie Das is the outgrown fictional character of Anjum Hasan's earlier novel *Lunatic in my Head* (2007) who in the earlier novel is an eight-year-old living in her own fantasy world, cooks up a story of being adopted and refuses to be realistic. *Neti, Neti* opens up to a modern-day setting of Bangalore, a place that seem to have accustomed to the frenzied traffic, the sudden surge of immigrants and a place that seems to have familiarized young minds to easily incur car loans, to a slightly growing Shillong drugged in Bob Dylan, the struggling existence of the non-tribals / outsiders, and a maddening period of state election. The introduction to both location in the texts points out to some vital phase of change taking place locally as the narrative immediately introduces us to the apprehensive discontent of Sophie's family with their location of home, Shillong. This discontentment occurs in the family, the reason being the dislocated identities within the space of her home with an atheist father, a mother who worshipped a transcendental God - that was everywhere and nowhere and an errant sister. With the occasional reminder about the invisible divinity the mother believed in, Mrs Das claims the reason of her disjointed family to the location of their home, Shillong which she says has "gone down the drain" (29). The discontentment is not easily evaded as further in the book she comments, "in this good-for-nothing town Sophie and Muku had, insofar as culture was concerned, learnt not the first letters of the alphabet, yet [however was] content to just stuff them with biryani as if that could fill the vacuum that culture had left unfilled" (236).

An interesting section from the book carries a conversation between Sophie and Ribor (a native of Shillong), that lets us examine the politics involved in the process of flushing the migrant communities. In the section titled "The Fatness of these Pursy Times" we see Sophie trying to cope up with the angst of a misfit, as she seeks for a certain convincing situation to confirm her

inclusion to the place (Shillong). What Ribor also realizes but does not confirm to, is the struggle of Sophie in his hometown as we look see in the conversation carried out between them:

> But I have to leave some day so …,' she said. 'But you've always lived here so…,' he said. These incomplete sentences didn't need completing…Sophie was saying – of course you can't take off into India just like that – you with your secret language and your unique face. And Ribor was saying – even if you're a *dkhar*, [meaning the non-tribal group of people in the Khasi dialect] even if my people have always wanted your people out, even if blood has been shed, you have the right to stay. (58)

Such narrative dialogues between characters helps us to understand that the problem of ethnic violence is an event that is questioned by few conscious individuals, like the character Ribor. While Sophie alternates between not really wanting to move out of place that is home to her she is also aware of the sense of not being accepted as she displays an anxiety of not having an identical feature with the people around her.

> She wasn't one of his [referring to Ribor who is a native of Shillong] people, didn't look like one of his people and most certainly didn't have the luxury of going away, coming back and staying – doesn't work… (58)

The disaporic struggle of Sophie constantly reverberates through the texts as she tries to achieve a sense of identity and belongingness and simultaneously attempts to embrace an inconsistent cultural difference. Her struggle extend beyond the impressions of a migrant experience of homelessness as she forcefully disengages from the community her parents belong to and shows disregard towards any religious activity. While the fiction

alternates between Sophie's position as a non-tribal / outsider in Shillong and the overpowering space in Bangalore, the fiction also includes narrative on the marginal location of North-East from the mainstream. The stereotypical approach towards the place is presented in the text lengthy conversation between Sophie and Shiva on the universal definition of someone from a marginal location, which cannot be ignored. We may consider here the character of Shiva as representative of the unassuming, ignorant and yet mindful individuals of the society. His apparently careful idea of the North-East is but a tragic location – that stands synonymous to the region's violent ethnic and conflicting politics.

> I hear you're from the Northeast. What a tragic place, said Shiva…
>
> Sophie said nothing, never quite sure how to live out this role as someone from the tragic Northeast – that amorphous, eternally misty region whose people apparently spent their lives either fighting each other or resisting the bullying arm of the Indian state…
>
> Shiva said, 'Who cares, really, about the idea of India. Do you? I mean if people want to raise their own flags and form their own little counties why is that such a problem?' Maybe it was the weed, but the word 'India' lodged itself in Sophie's brain. (124-125)

In the continuing narrative of the section titled "Don't Stop the Noise" Sophie helps the readers with a lengthy definition of 'Indianness'. Such description that excludes the marginal from the mainstream finds a significant point to take note of as it outlines India through an assortment of choice materials such as, the Amar Chitra Katha, the histories of King Harshavardhan and Mahabharata and the 9 o'clock news on TV. These selective labels that defines

India then unassumingly becomes the ultimatum contradicting any other experience, that does not finds a similarity to these, as the 'other'.

> Somewhere in the depths of her childhood she had formed the idea that India was an exact feeling, a fixed series of things in contrast to everything else in her environment…The words of the Rabindranath Tagore poem – 'Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake' – sung during the school assembly on Independence Day were India. The yellowed pages of her history book when she was eight, filled with stories about King Harshavardhan and scenes from the Mahabharata, were India. The little flags with their dripping orange and green watercolors…were self-evidently India…At school, the girls who oiled their hair and worried about exams reeked of India, as against those who wore their skirts and short and who, already at thirteen or twelve, understood the mysterious workings of sex. Amar Chitra Katha comics, the 9 o'clock news on TV, diyas on Diwali…the mithai shop from where the flies floated without drowning in the basin of rosogullas and the laddoos… – were uniquely and indisputably India. (125)

In the character illustration of Sophie, Hasan draws a vivid narrative to express how the feeling of belongingness becomes a psychological pursuit that exist in the mind, as Sophie associate with the idea of home in the unconscious dialogue of the book. A section titled "Flight" brings in a narrative as Sophie relates herself with the people she sees at the Calcutta airport and through the winding journey from Guwahati to Shillong. She makes a mental description of the people around her:

> a woman with slanting eyes wearing a checked shawl…a boy with naturally spiky hair…someone wearing stylish loafers…the clear air [that speaks to Sophie of home]…the red soil, the *kongs*[5] with conical baskets of fruits or washing slung on their backs slowly walking up hill-paths…[people] selling small pyramids of the world's sweetest pineapples and oranges…faded signs at hairpin bends saying 'Accident Prone Area'". (185-186)

Passages such as this that allow readers to look at the thought processes of Sophie evidently indicate her need for acceptance as she relate her dislocated identity by struggling to achieve some connection with the fanciful objects of the place. Perhaps for someone like Sophie the only way to attain an identity comes through an act of self-assurance, as Uncle Rock (a character from the book) paraphrases Bob Dylan song to Sophie:

> It's fine to travel and see the world…but in the end I just want to go back to my own little place and shut the door. Time is an ocean but it ends at the shore, like Dylan said. We all need to find our own shores, moh (184)

And, Sophie's recall of the fictional character of Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary:

> what Emma Bovary thought when 'it seemed to her that certain places on earth must bring forth happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, that cannot thrive elsewhere'. Where the lake [here referring to the Umiam lake which is considered by travellers as a point of exit from Shillong or vice versa] had once been her gateway to the undiscovered larger world, it was now the point at which the world began to shrink…Everyone who lived in high-up, magical places must feel the same way. You come down into the world and

> mingle, but all the while there's something calling you back. (186)

The other text of Hasan *Difficult Pleasures* (2013), a collection of short stories, brings a completely different set-up in terms of the geographical locations, character representations and narrative expressions, as compared to the previously discussed text *Neti, Neti*. The need to bring this text into discussion is essential to understand the various definitions of home where the anxiety of an outsider and his longing for home is a universal experience that take place much beyond the smaller region's of North-East. In this collection, the struggle of the characters alternates in the quest for a physical space between the looming cityscapes of Bangalore, Bombay, Hyderabad, Delhi and even England. The quests take place in the book through characters such as Science and Ayana of "Revolutions" and "Good Housekeeping". Science arrives at Bombay and in the narrative we see him contemplating the city before him to the picturesque imagination he had before his arrival. To him Bombay is the city where:

> every human gesture seemed to be a larger one made by the city—the deftness with which a bespectacled man pushed past him in the subway, the wily fruit seller…the practiced way a taxi driver stuck out his arm to turn down his meter, the…elegant lady beggar sitting cross-legged on the street picked her nose. (3-4)

Similarly, Ayana of the story "Good Housekeeping" engages in a personal reflection as she return, after thirteen years, to a place where she once lived. Ayana takes a mental note of the change around her as she tries to relate with the place through the following description:

> against the emptiness of her flat and the craziness of her life, Ayana was aware of the throb of the lane around her: a man wearing giant sunglasses reversing his silver Land Rover…barefoot children setting a pile of cartons, rubbish and dried leaves…an aarti in the temple, bells clanging and voices singing. (19-20)

I see a sense of inevitability in characters such as Science and Ayana as they wade through the strange moments in their lives. And this is further representative of characters such as Mrs Ali of "The Big Picture" who offer a vivid description of how 'personal space creates a self'. Hasan anticipates this claim as she draws the narratives in *Difficult Pleasures* to location such as the suburban Bangalore, countryside in Sweden etc. and transports the characters within these urban spaces as she appropriately says, "each story is a completely different little universe which you enter for a short time, inhabit for a short time and then leave forever" ("Penguin India").

The quest for home and its negation finds a response in this text of Hasan where the idea of home is projected with a more universal or global context. For example, 1) the geographical landscape of the stories that shifts from the North-East India to the regions of mainland India / across the world and 2) the narrative that includes cosmopolitan characters whose struggles are set in concern with feelings and approaches familiar to the urban contemporary space. In the story titled "The Big Picture" Mrs Ali struggle to achieve a sense of home and an identity in an oddly unfamiliar space, as she sits on a plane for Europe. The story opens to Mrs Ali on board a flight to Europe as she comfortably reaches for a slice of lime only to be rebuked in shame and confusion by the steward who jerks away as if bitten, admonishing, "Tongs please, tongs please" (83) to which she contemplates on the following lines:

> It is possible to feel completely at home in the world but this is only because we have laid claim to a small space—a few rooms, certain streets, a familiar town—over which our habitual wanderings create grooves that we can comfortably slip into. In truth, the world is a strange and horrifying place…(83)

In the continuing narrative of the story and in what can be assumed as retaliation to the European steward, Mrs Ali in a museum in Europe involves in an act of resentment while observing the painting of Max Ernst. Lifting her bloodstained wad and dabbing it on the moon of Max Ernst painting she, "left a faint brown smudge which looked like it had always been there" (94).

The transitory nature of home that comes with personal choice finds expression in the displacement of Ayana in the story "Good Housekeeping" through the various locations of Hyderabad, Mussoorie, Delhi, England and Bangalore. The choice of these movements come across with absurdly trivial reasons of her mother Tara John, for whom a clean break always meant nose-diving into another city. Tara John's breaks followed escaping from her divorce with her husband, reminiscence of her childhood vacation spot in Mussoorie and the remembrance of a particular fruit from Delhi, the memory of its taste driving her mad. As Ayana returns to Dasava Nagar thirteen years later she looks for a sense of place, caused as a result of her multiple movements.

In the same story we are introduced to Jagdeep Singh, a postgraduate research assistant in England, who Ayana in their first encounter closely observes the gravity of his behavior inside the classroom with "his strange pullovers, with sleeves so long they almost covered his fingers, and his hesitant smile, he appeared to not quite trust life" (26). Through the brief narrative of Jagdeep in the story, also called Jack, he consistently appears as someone

searching for the meaning of home in the way he presents himself as hesitant, shy with a look of guardedness and a tentative laughter, "as if laughing at something, anything, was going too far" (26). This becomes more apparent in the continuing narrative as Hasan assigns Jack with a particular course for teaching titled "The Politics of Displacement in the Indian Literature of the Diaspora" (26) to be instructed for students including Ayana. The specific choice of course is significant to understand the homeless identity of individuals like Jack and Ayana who, in the story, are actually Indian diasporas at a university in England.

In "Birds" Hasan portrays the complex identity of home through a young character Samir whose definition of home is the familiar physical space and not an assemblage of close cousins and relatives in a defined traditional geographical landscape. "Birds" is the story of Samir and his Dad's return to India from Jersey, for a spiritual union with his mother and their attempt to find an association to her native place, India. However, what follows is an uncomfortable association to the place as several perplexed questions fill his mind in his search for a sense of familiarity as he walks with his dad through the bazaar with crowded shops. Samir's apprehensiveness and doubts is visible through the following questions that runs on his mind as he observes the activities in the streets of his mother's home, "Why are the women's faces hidden? Where is the camel going? What language is that…What are those sticky brown things they're selling? What game are those men playing on that cloth board? (217-223). Bewildered by the confused and messy bazaar area and his dad sudden "rushing about in India with a worried look in his face" (223) Samir's constantly indicate a longing to return to home (in Jersey). An important aspect to take note from the story is the disillusionment of a place for Samir that comes through the chaotic identity crisis that never allow him to truly understand his place of belonging. For example, Samir's

confusion when his kindergarten teacher Miss Patty at Jersey identifies him as an Indian:

> Am I Indian, thinks Samir. When he was five years old and Miss Patty said to everyone in his kindergarten class, 'And Samir's from India,' he knew she had mixed him up with his mother. He remembers that as the start of a confusion that never went away. (218-219)

And also, Samir's limited association with India as which is reflected in the following statement:

> Samir is not sure he wants to meet his grandparents.
>
> 'Are they Indian? asks Samir…
>
> 'Of course they're Indian. What do you think your mum was? says Dad…'You're Indian too.'
>
> 'No, I'm not,' says Samir. He only knows three Indians—his mum and his friends, the twins Shruti and Aditya. (218)

3.6 Framing the Insider Narrative of Ethnic Claims in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land* (2012)

Boats on Land (hereafter mentioned as *BOL*) is studied here to primarily understand the narrative of few stories from the collection that draws on the conflicts between the insider / outsider. The conflict of the insider / outsider is observed, in the narrative of *BOL*, from the perspective of the native and how Pariat, as a native of Shillong, attempts to understand the ideology of ethnic claims. The discussion of the text *BOL* is important here as it, in a way, responds to the text of Hasan's *Neti, Neti* by bringing a native perspective of the inter-regional ethnic claims. *BOL* also represent a close relation to *Neti, Neti* as the geographical setting of both these texts is located in Shillong.

BOL covers fifteen short stories that deal with topics of ethnic territorial claims besides narratives of indigenous folk beliefs. Some crucial narratives in the stories echo Pariat's constant inquiry on the lives of the outsiders that develop questions of ambiguity towards concepts of identity, belongingness and ethnicity. Pariat's narrative probes deep into the consciousness of ethnic violence that points to the similar narrative style employed by indigenous writers across the world. Cecile Sandten's essay "Ethnic Life Writing" looks at two books, Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's semi-autobiographical novel *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) and Yvonne Johnson's autobiography *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (2000). In the essay, Sandten introduces the term "ethnic life writing". I can only relate so much to her definition of "ethnic life writing" to the larger objective of this chapter that deals with the concept of ethnicity and the consciousness of women writers from the North-East who puts forward, in their works, narratives of region's history and politics while simultaneously having to negotiate with the cultural and national affiliation. Pariat reflect a similar view as she formulates and re-interprets violence in order to understand the narrative of the outsider which she performs through what Sandten understands as a practice of inventing the self and a "form of resistance, memory-work and self-narration in terms of a possible key to (self-) recognition and, eventually, liberation" (309).

Stories such as "Secret Corridors", "Sky Graves" and the title story "Boats on Land" are set in Shillong with local characters created alongside outsiders (in the context of these stories, natives of neighboring place Assam or the ones who immigrated to the hills in the '60s). The narratives of these stories displays the youngsters of Shillong who flirt with activism and clutch at identity, people who leave Shillong, but are inscrutably drawn back, all of which comes with change in the peoples' lives.

> This town, according to my parents, with its constant unrest and wanton youth, was headed for nothing but disaster. They couldn't understand it, where had it gone? The peaceful little place they'd grown up in, with its quaint British ways and pretty bungalows, its safe streets and pine-dappled innocence. They'd watched it transform before their eyes. (129)

Similar narrative is represented in the story titled "Sky Graves" that defines Shillong as "the rough 'wild west' part of the town, an area of strict local laws and devout churchgoers. Not a place for outsiders" (146). While such narratives are illustrative of the gradual change taking place in the community, stories such as "Secret Corridors" brings a unforeseen environment taking place among a group of young school girls. The narrative concerns a group of young schoolgirls and their classrooms that defines the small but serious parameters of an all girls' convent school. Natalie shifts her attention from Iba to the view outside the window when Mrs Chatterjee interrupts her daydream. As a punishment Natalie is asked to move to the front bench of the class the disgrace of what feared her the most was not the front seat but to sit beside Carmel, who is the "other" in the class. The classroom, like every other, had "invisible lines of demarcation as strict as in any church or temple. Who was it acceptable to eat lunch with, who you could partner for arts and crafts…and, rising singularly above the rest, who you sat next to in class" (82-83). This creation of lines within the small space of the school results in a more concerning situation as we look at a conversation carried out during a lunch break:

> At the opposite end of the room, a group of *dkhar*[6] girls animatedly conversing in Hindi occasionally erupted into raucous laughter. "Marwaris," muttered Doreen, "My dad says we need to kick them all out of our state". (84-85)

The book entails similar narratives through vivid description of ethnic political climate in Shillong as explained in the title story "Boats on Land" that draws the narrative of a wealthy Assamese family who lived in Shillong during the eighties. Ranjit recalls the experience of his wife, Mamuni:

> One evening Mamuni was coming back from the market, and this Khasi guy stopped her and slapped her, in the middle of the road…I remember when she got home and told me, I was so angry, but she only seemed surprised that he'd called her an outsider. She kept saying, "I've lived here all my life". (187)

Pariat's illustration of such narrative expression in the fictional work is important for writers like her to express the uneasy existence of natives who share an uncomfortable ideology with people unwilling to perform cultural negotiations. Appreciative towards the need for a more cosmopolitan co-existence Pariat offers a narrative of consciousness, in select stories, by responding to the lives of the outsider through a clearer definition of the contested ethnic political chaos. What she also does along the narratives of the stories is underline an important implication of the communal violence that is negated by few sections of the native by drawing characters such as Natalie. Pariat through her characters attempts to bring examples of accepting and acknowledging the outsiders as she create a narrative space for someone like Natalie who is uncomfortable of her friends remark against the 'other' and who she considers "like her, born and brought up here, and who considered Shillong their home" (85).

The notion of ethnicity as a defining element of an individual informs the problematic existence of such ideological construction. In view of such construction Janice Pariat states, "humans have always moved and settled across the world.

Immigration is a natural, organic process. What is unnatural, artificial and arbitrary are borders. It would be more progressive and humane to fight borders, not immigration" ("The Bad Old Days"). What is important to understand through such statement is for communities to be more accommodative as society become more cosmopolitan. Conscious of the concept of "dominant ideology" (qtd. in "Outsider versus Insider") Wanphrang Diengdoh and Janice Pariat, both locals from an ethnically violent space (Shillong), expresses:

> I have realized that wherever you may be, the dominant ideology or population will always try to enforce its principles upon you. If you do not subscribe to these ideas, once again it is your identity that is in question. (Diengdoh)

> a minority in one place is a majority in another, and vice versa. The non-tribals are a minority in Shillong, but they are a majority in other places in India. (Pariat)

The four texts in this study brings individual representations of ethnic violence based on the way the writers' situate their characters in specific geographical location. In *Mari* it is the violent ravage of a war period that displaces the location of home and creates new lines of border and boundaries in the territorial space of a community driven by strong tribal customs and traditions. *Neti, Neti*, represent the migrant communities of Shillong through the life of Sophie Das and her family, who despite the outward treatment of prejudice and discrimination from the locals over ethnic claims of space and dominion, strives to achieve a reframed sense of what home is. *Difficult Pleasures* narrativizes the lives of individuals seeking for a need to escape and the longing to belong, driven by the different kinds of urban lives and experiences that assist in interpreting the definition of 'home' and 'belonging' in urban spaces. *Boats on Land* is an organic relation of Anjum Hasan's *Neti,*

Neti where characters are set in the same location, Shillong and in which a lot of the conversation exchanged exudes the local's acute claim of ownership and the outsiders need to create an imagined space. The unifying thread between all of the illustrated characters in these works, both the locals and the outsiders, is the search for a sense of home that begins from embittered experiences of their own lives. The events in all the texts presents the historical events of the individual states and therefore, in as much as the four texts are analyzed within an aesthetic literary framework of defining a reframed sense of 'home', the characters dialogue stand representative to various events of ethnic conflict and violence of the region.

The chapter's close textual analysis allows in addressing the concept of ethnicity by examining the relevance of its terms and associated notions in the geographical location of North-East India. The study of margin from various perspectives, characters as well as space, expands the definition of minority / majority or home / homelessness by cutting across smaller spaces, such as the North-East India, that calls for an alternate definition of marginality. In such spaces margin / periphery / border are no longer profoundly defined terms, applied in the discourse of the other, but for whom there is a lack of word to identify or at the least categorize them. This chapter makes an important contribution to the lesser-known political conflict existing within the region that is overlooked against the type cast violent political definition of the region by contextualizing it within the framework of the Easterine Kire, Anjum Hasan and Janice Pariat's fiction.

Notes

1. The following points are taken from the Graduate thesis of Resenmenla Longchar titled "Oral Narratives of Ao-Nagas: Constructing Identity" (2011) in which she mentions the

privilege position of the Ao-Naga women. The following points, paraphrased from Lucy Zehol's book *Women in Naga Society* (2002), illustrates the role of the women and her rights in administering complex situation in the sacred and secular rituals of the society.

- A girl can be named after her father's family but she cannot name her children after her father‟s family.
- In the past, except in certain religious offerings, which are restricted only to priests, women participated in all social and religious activities and also danced together with the opposite sex.
- A woman cannot inherit property, movable or immovable, though she may be given a gift. She has the right to sell it if she so wishes.
- If a woman receives immovable property or otherwise from her father in the form of gifts during his lifetime, it remains hers till her death, after which it goes back to her father's heir.
- On her marriage, her separate property does not merge with that of her
  husband.
- She cannot become a member of the *Tatar Putu Menden* [Village Council].
- In the past, she could not become a *Patir / Putir* (Priest) though she may be the oldest person in the village. She is debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. However, she can assist her husband in family worship. Earlier, there were medicine women, diviners, tiger women and prophetesses among the womenfolk.
- She cannot participate in public debates or discussions but can counsel and advise her husband at home to a certain degree.

- She cannot inherit landed property. She is not liable for any debt of her
  ancestors or her heir.

2. This quote is taken from an article titled “Male Portrait”, a series of essays individually published in *The Asssam Tribune*. The essay was accessed and downloaded in 2014. However, the material is no longer available in the website. This quote is important to mention here and hence, have been referred from the downloaded document.
3. The mention here of the Bengali community in Shillong is only a reference to many other settler communities living in this part of the region. It is important to note that the community target is not restrictive towards the Bengalis as various available materials read of communal violence that gradually affects other communities as well for example, the Nepali settlers and the Biharis. This is also explained by Patricia Mukhim in her article “Politics of Identity and Location” published in *The Hindu* 26 April 2014 and in the comment section of Janice Pariat’s article “The Place I Cannot Call Home”.
4. The term is borrowed from M.S. Prabhakara essay “Reinventing identities” where he use the term to bring into discussion the political mobilization in Assam by small tribal communities to define an exclusivist territory and political space for themselves.
5. *Kong* in the Khasi dialect is the equivalent of ‘miss’ and is used when addressing a female friend / an unknown person. (Definition taken from *learnkhasi.blogspot.in*)
6. *Dkhar* in the Khasi dialect is translated or referred to non-tribals outsiders in Meghalaya.

Chapter 4

Little Nationalities: About Writings in English

Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story—shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. The denial…violates our humanity.

I believe that every story has its space in History.

- Easterine Kire, "Should Writers Stay in Prison? Of Invisible Prisons"[1]

4.1 Introduction

The above quote extracted from a speech of Easterine Kire, delivered at the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) conference at Tromso, Norway, gives a good starting point for the discourse of this chapter. The quote conveys a message of the basic right and the writers' demand for a choice of narrative expression that allow their writings to be produced, irrespective of the kinds of material they engage with. For Easterine and many other writers from the North-East, it is the claim for a 'narrative space' that will define their cultural individuality through the stories of everyday experiences and the mystic world they connect with.

The excerpt gives an idea of the chapter's objective where I look at select literary works that invites multiple layers of expression and new narrative definition that leads to a distinct literary representation. This multiple layers of expression and new narrative welcome the freedom to converse unreservedly on topics of oral and indigenous narrative, political violence, culture and traditional lifestyle. This quote also relates with Homi Bhabha's

similar argument proposed for his forthcoming book *The Right to Narrate*. In the article Bhabha talks of how the process of cultural translation takes root "by propagating and protecting what [he] calls the "right to narrate"—the authority to tell stories, recount or recast histories" ("The Right to Narrate"). He mentions the narrative right that have been a hesitant act for some writers and makes an important remark by asserting the need to give "authority to those speech-acts that are made under pressure, those disturbed and disrupted dialogues of humankind" ("The Right to Narrate"). This, to me, is a relevant exercise for these contemporary writers whose narrative is as yet to find a voice, acknowledgement and recognition outside of the geographical and discursive world of North East studies.

Easterine also makes a strong note, in this statement, for indigenous writers' to assert the necessity and need for literary expression and liberation in the act of creating a story for a community. This relates to the literary works from the North-East for whom the creative process involves multiple negotiation of maintaining balance between, oral and written, myth and the contemporary, tradition and modernity, the pagan and believer, local and global and therefore compels linguistic innovation to preserve the cultural heritage in written form. Therefore, Easterine's quote is an urgent plea to the indigenous writers and storytellers for the need to create a narrative space for the community.

In this chapter, I argue the necessity of finding a theoretical method that will aid in examining the aesthetic narrative of indigenous literary works of North-East. This involves translating orality into textuality, in the ironic context of having English and its global capital as its medium of communication. In carrying out such attempt, I am cognizant of the problematic of English as a

colonial language, which I will address in the sub-section of the chapter. The discourse on this will require examining the approach of the writers from the North-East who write with an awareness of the community's socio-political realities and the needs and expectation of the local readership.

Chapter two and three provide a detailed study on some significant problem that exists in the scholarship of the region's literary works. These chapters address the argument by reframing the narrative in the available scholarship by contextualizing it in the light of a body of texts that constitutes a very organic study on the life of various indigenous tribes and the tribal network. The final chapter examines the particular use of language and linguistic devices in English that represent what I term "little nationalities" through a close narrative analysis of select texts. In terms of the narrative transition from oral to written and the shift from native to a global language, I examine the linguistic documentation and expression used by the writers in recounting varied topics of indigenous culture, communal politics, ethnicity, borders and boundaries. The analysis involves examining the level of expression used and the faithful representation as the writers' document the oral history in the English language. A preliminary observation affirms that, 1) using the English language tool presents a dilemma of writerly framework that these writers have to negotiate and in doing so produce texts that represent a perspective of national culture and ideology and 2) they have to often, due to linguistic constraints, exclude elements that maybe unsuitable for expressions in English.

The chapter studies the following texts, Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006). The three select texts are written originally in English

and hence the process of translation and therefore mediation in the written form is not a conflict. However, I examine the linguistic pattern in the narrative of the texts by borrowing the term 'transliteration' which I define, for the purpose of this chapter, as the ability to create a comfortable space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries through the English language that is molded according to the individual needs of expression. Harish Trivedi's extensive contribution and engagement in translation studies leads to new perspectives on translation in relation to postcolonial societies. In his essay "Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation", Trivedi makes an urgent need to "protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation"). This reflects Trivedi's concern, particularly, to the many indigenous languages of the world that are yet to be translated from the native ground and the fear of being translated "against our will and against our grain" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation"). I align myself with Trivedi's definition of translation as "an act of invention that produces a new original in another language" (1) and define 'transliteration' as a state of being able to express indigenous / ethnic lifestyle locally without having to follow a standard set of linguistic narrative. Mitra Phukan notes this form of expression in her essay "Writing in English in the North East" where she talks of the several "Englishes" being forged in the work of writers in English from the region. Phukan's discussion is based on how writers' from the North-East, as compared to other Indian writers in English, exhibit a level of comfort and authority in transforming their narratives into their unique collective "Englishes" (2013). In the light of trying to ascertain what a folk or a mythical element is to the author and what may seem to be less ethnic to an outsider these writers

shape the English language according to his or her own unique way, with the demands of the material that he or she is working with. Taking authors from two different states, Phukan says that the "diverse experiences of Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, and the cultures they write from, inevitably shape the vocabulary, the cadences, even the sentence structures of their work, because of the different languages that they call their Mother Tongues" (2013). While inventing their own form of English is a Pan-Indian postcolonial phenomena, the writers are making this transition from the oral to the literary without the mediation of another writing tradition.

4.2 Postcolonial Snags in the Application of Language Theory: Reinscribing / Reauthorizing Imperialist Notion

Postcolonial studies invites challenging grounds of discourse and inclusion, especially of literary works produced from smaller region, on questions of canonicity. The problematic of postcolonial studies begins from trying to define the literal meaning of the term to challenging questions on which national literatures or authors can / should be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. This uncertainty trails to a larger discourse in postcolonial scholarship on the problem of colonial language that constitutes a strong imperialist notion, which reduces other language as unsuitable for carrying out literary dialogue. Language is often a central question in postcolonial studies. The linguistic assertion by the coloniser for wide implementation of their native language during the period of colonialization continues to govern postcolonial spaces including the contemporary literary world. Such persistent effort by the colonisers however questions writers, writing under the label of minor language, of an otherwise potential opportunity that can be formed by insistently bringing the local language literature to the readers or by alternately using the

coloniser language and re-forming it into new literary forms. In a succinct essay on postcolonial demotion of native language titled "Language", Jennifer Margulis and Peter Nowakoski refers to Ngûgî wa Thiong'o's term "cultural bomb" (3) which relates to Ngûgî's practice of English language in Africa and in his departure from writing in English. The "cultural bomb" narrates the brutal process of "erasing memories of pre-colonial cultures and history and installs the dominance of new, more insidious forms of colonialism" ("Language"). What it also expresses is that the act of submitting to the colonizer's language is an indirect form of negating one's culture and allowing history to be fabricated through foreign linguistic expression. Jennifer and Peter also talks of the dominance of the colonized language and how postcolonial writers are beginning to reciprocate it, by stating that:

> In response to the systematic imposition of colonial languages, some postcolonial writers and activists advocate a complete return to the use of indigenous languages. Others see the language [e.g. English] imposed by the colonizer as a more practical alternative, using the colonial language both to enhance inter-nation communication…and to counter a colonial past through de-forming a "standard" European tongue and re-forming it in new literary forms. ("Language")

This act of "re-forming" the European language in works of literature is a relevant exercise for the contemporary writers from the North-East India or for any indigenous writer. As mentioned earlier of the varied "Englishes" used, in the narrative of literary works, by writers from the North-East it is essential to emphasize on deconstructing the literary myth of a standard language or a narrative that defines a 'good' work of literature. Salman Rushdie's similar observation to the problem of language talks of working

towards the idea of constructing "new Englishes" ("Language"). Although most of Rushdie's writing moves along discourse on key topics of the history of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Great Britain, the pervasive language debate constantly resurfaces as an urgent problem that needs to be carefully studied. He comments on how, "working in new Englishes can be a therapeutic act of resistance, remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience" (qtd. in "Language") by further stating in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" (1992) that instead of trying to ignore or escape from the use of colonial language (as Ngûgi does by shifting from English to Gikuyu) the English language must be the starting point for postcolonial writers to solve problems that confront emerging / recently independent colonies.

> One of the changes [in the location of anglophone writers of Indian descent] has to do with attitudes towards the use of English. Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes… To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (17)

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) explores the ways in which writers encounter a dominant, colonial language. They describe a process whereby there is a dislocation of a standard language, which is replaced by a local variant that reflects a distinct cultural outlook. This process evaluates and exposes, through the literary texts, the history and culture of a community in a suitable English language. Ashcroft et al. use the term "Abrogation" for such kind of delineation, which is explained as, "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative

or “correct” usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning “inscribed” in the words” (37). I extend the meaning of the term in this chapter and use it from a slightly different perspective of the linguistic narrative in the literary works from the North-East that continues to engage in a (distinct / locally flavored) pattern that contradicts any other literary work that is produced from outside the region. However, there is a challenge involved in such engagement as it leads to a failure of acceptance where such literary works are labelled in the category of a massive conventional assumption of a work that tells only a single story of a small ethnic community.

Literature from this region is largely born out of its traditional oral art form that defines the literary, socio-political and economic thought of the community. While this kind of literary narrative is new to the mainstream readers, indigenous writings across the world has always had a rich literary tradition of which can be seen in the writings of Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, part of African-American writings. In the literary works of North-East, the aspects of orality in the form of narrative comes through the cultural history evolved from a distinct account of myth and folklore. For example, Temsula Ao’s poem “Stone-people from Lungterok [meaning six stones]” talks of the genesis of the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland from the mythical six stones, a community of tribal people who believe themselves to have emerged out of the earth. Similarly, Mamang Dai’s continuity and engagement in oral tradition is maintained with a strong notion that there is always history in our words, the jungle is not just a patch of greens there are voices, the rivers is not just a flow of water and that all these and everything has a landscape (Keynote Address by Mamang Dai). Janice Pariat’s oral narrative is also worth mentioning here as she narrates stories of souls turning into trees alongside the deeply entrenched oral practices of mantras that serve

as a weapon for destruction, the description of which is read in the beautiful evocative opening story "A Waterfall of Horses" of her debut fiction *Boats on Land* (2012).

Such examples assert that language is closely connected to different cultural experiences and hence it is only important and relevant for scholars to frequently revisit, reinscribe and reauthorize the imperialist notion. The need for language to find a valid platform for literary expression, that may not necessarily or readily fit into the larger national narrative and yet is indispensable at the same time to assert the importance of minor literature, brings forth an expression from G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) "… make language stammer, or make it 'wail,' stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities" (104). Similarly, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), Ngûgî posits that, through language people not only describe the world, but also understand themselves by it. He theorizes the close relation between language and culture in the following description:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world … Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Ngûgî's uses the term "mental universe"[2] in the essay to explain how "English became more than a language…and all the others had to bow before it in deference" (11). In relation to the term, he expresses the negative impact on the imposition of foreign language by stating:

> the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a peoples culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizer. The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized. (390)

The essay further determines the impact of the imperial power structure imposed on the colonizer by exterminating the essence of local. Ngûgî narrates the colonial practice at the elementary school where the imposition of the English language affects the mental conscience of the young students and explains the definite reality of annihilation of nativity of the community:

> one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school…A button was initially given to one pupil who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue…children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were being taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community…English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences and all other branches of learning. (386)

I look at the essay of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's "What is a Minor Literature" to examine the various ways in which a minor literary work is characterized through the development of three major characteristics. The three characteristics are, deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to political immediacy and the collective assemblage of enunciation. I point out an important passage from the essay that elucidate one of the central argument of this chapter which states, "A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority

makes in a major language" (16). The objective of this argument is to deconstruct the idea of a major language that continues to be the central approach in classification of a good literary work. Beth Brant, an Aboriginal writer, puts a similar argument forward as she says, "why is a white-European standard still being held up as the criteria for all writing? Why is racism still so rampant in the arts?" (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 8). This thought shares similar expression in the context of North-East writings that are often judged against the standard narrative technique of mainstream Indian literature. It is highly imperative to understand that a minor literature, irrespective of the language through which it is constructed can definitely be the portion from where discourse is carried out.

Deleuze and Guattari in their essay constantly situate literature as a platform for continuing discourse that is charged with collective as well as revolutionary enunciation. By this they emphasize on literature studies by using the term "literary machine" (17) to define the means by which one can carry forward topic of discussion that have been absent in the academia.

> The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come, not at all for ideological reasons, but because the literary machine alone is `determined to fulfill the conditions of a collective enunciation that is lacking elsewhere in this milieu. (17)

The first characteristic of minor literature relates to a major problem in literary studies in which the use of language denies access to writing to a group of community that otherwise has a rich native linguistic expression. The deterritorialization of a minor literature / language in many ways create a certain amount of fear and doubt on the importance of native writing as it restricts literary freedom. The case is the same with the Jews of Prague who in the

process of being denied access to writing "turns their literature into something impossible — the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise" (16). The denial of writing, for North-East literature, comes through the narratives of the literary works that includes an indulgent expression of the native / local experiences. These works that emerge along the lines of indigenous expressions does not fit into the narrative pattern of standard literary works and therefore leads to an impossibility of writing.

While the second characteristic states that minor literature is often categorized as "political" as such literary works exist at a very limited space for expression denying room for an alternate discourse, the third characteristic explains the collective enunciation of a minor literature by stating that it lacks the ability for an individuated enunciation. What Deleuze and Guattari takes off from this "incapability" is the explanation on how literature continues to operate with the responsibility of carrying out discourse for the "often inactive" national consciousness which is often in the process of break-down. Therefore, a minor literature while "skeptical, yet produces an active solidarity among members of the collective group" (Braziel 2). Minor literature as an expression of collective enunciation relates to the works produced from the North-East that underlies strong community feelings where there is a conception of a common action. This narrative of communistic expression is a definite characteristic of any indigenous societies that falls back on the history of oral tradition.

I look at the theory of minor literature and relate it to the texts for study from the linguistic perspective that embodies local essence in its narrative structure. What makes these literary works different is in the way in which the language is structured where the native expressions signifies a meaning that goes much beyond

much its immediate lexical meaning. This art form defines the literary works of the North-East in which orality continues to dominate the socio-political and economic thought of the community. In such kind of set-up words play a dominant role as it delivers individual thoughts that influences the community or even the nation as a whole. The history of Aboriginal writing on orality states:

> the abilty to use language through storytelling, oratory, and song was highly regarded…because the spoken or sung word expressed the spirit and breath of life of the speaker, and thus was considered sacred. (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 10)

Similar to the Aboriginal history of orality, this statement also relates with the indigenous community of North-East and their approach to the traditional knowledge system. It also relates to the concept of 'transliteration' as it allow in creating / developing a linguistic space for the indigenous writers self-definition. This linguistic space raises questions on the narrative style that narrates communistic expression. Therefore, this leads to an inquiry on how literary works that are highly inclined toward community can contribute or associate to the recognized collection of literature studies. However, the use of such expression continues to prove its importance through indigenous works as writers engage with narratives of community for expressing individual thought. Brant expresses this further by stating, "We do not write as individuals communing with a muse. We write as members of an ancient, cultural consciousness. Our muse is us" (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 12). Brant's critical observation of Aboriginal and Western communities deconstructs the discourse on why community writing is as essential as writing about the individual and the self.

In translating from oral to written or archiving the oral history in written, the thrust of these writers is not to sell North-East expression but it is a space for them to understand their own cultural distinctiveness and for the mainstream reader / scholar to be cognizant of the incompleteness of an Indian postcolonial genre without inclusion of the work from similar margins. This understanding and identification is crucial, especially for indigenous writers, as they seek a narrative to express and situate themselves in the current discourse of literary studies. Nirmala Menon's *Remapping the Indian Postcolonial Canon* (2016) reflects this approach as she seeks to establish a more representative and varied postcolonial discipline by locating the diverse literatures in "multiple postcolonial languages" (2). In relation to this she says:

> for postcolonial scholars, invested in understanding and creating a theoretical discipline of Postcolonialism, it is in our interest to enrich the field in order to expand the conversation multilingually…So it is less the need of Hindi (or Bengali or Kannada) to be heard in English than the postcolonial theoretical field's necessity "to hear" differently." (145)

While Menon deepens her stakes for an inclusive linguistic diversity of postcolonial geographies I make a similar argument between North-East literature and mainstream Indian literature to establish a ground to recognize the distinct indigenous vocabulary existing in the Indian literary postcolonial spaces.

4.3 Sacredness of Words and Life: Indigenous Authenticities in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014)

> *Stories…words…I too have words* (288)
>
> - Mamang Dai, *The Black Hill* (2014)

To further discuss the problematic of colonial power relation, I look at the creative construct and the expression of indigenous authenticities in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (heareafter mentioned as *TBH*). Indigenous literary works invites readers to a distinctive vocabulary of local literature that often has its own unique approach in presenting the context to the readers. The challenge while working with indigenous texts is that there is little or no theoretical vocabulary that captures the specific ways of distinctiveness. Such problem is visible in other Aboriginal literature too where writers use race theory but are constrained in that it also narrates a colonial power relation toward colonized texts that are twice subjugated due to their marginalization at both levels. Peter Rasevych's thesis chapter titled "Literary Colonization" studies the problem of colonial power imbalances in Aboriginal people and literature. He expounds the problem of literary theories that are mostly Eurocentric in nature. The chapter takes at a quote from Lee Maracle's book *Oratory: coming to theory* (1990) that states:

> Literary theory, with its confusing jargon and scientific analyses of words has only succeeded in producing dispassionate, dehumanized dialogues. (24) what is the point of presenting the human condition in a language separate from the human experience: passion, emotion, and character?...Power resides with the theorists so long as they use language no one understands. In order to gain the right to theorize, one must attend their institutions for many years, learn this other language, and unlearn our feeling for the human condition. (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 24)

The discourse on the authenticities of indigenous literature and the question of theory brings us again to the problem of postcolonial studies and its absence of traditional indigenous

teachings. This absence results in an erasure of such writings / texts as it does not fit into theories constructed and defined by the other. Aboriginal writers elaborate the need for the creation of a new literary framework that enables discussion from the indigenous cultural context. Such initiative promotes smaller emerging literatures from North-East India to co-relate to similar problems and move the literary struggle of minor literatures to a larger audience. However, the disclosure of this problem is only an attempt on the part of the writers to further elucidate the need for inclusion of such themes to the already existent topics. Scholars and critics debate the problematic involved with the term postcolonial as a colonial expression, an act of imperialism and a study that "effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question" (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 25). What is needed is a theoretical support for the indigenous works and a narrative space for authentic self-expression as Peter Rasevych says:

> What is needed clearly is a truly "post-colonial" literary theory that emerges from Native culture's own literary paradigms, which "post-colonialism" does not yet provide. (25)

This statement relate with Kimberly Blaeser's approach towards the need for an authentic self-expression that requires a deep involvement of the one who creates:

> rather than an external critical voice and method which seeks to penetrate, appropriate, colonize or conquer the cultural center, and thereby, change the stories or remake the literary meaning [it is important to have theories that can offer expression to the texts] (qtd. in *Reading Native Literature* 26)

TBH is based on real life narrative that takes place on a rugged terrain, the quiet river and the mysterious mountain hill covering two close neighboring states of the then North-East – Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Set in mid-nineteenth century, the story brings us to a period in history when the two states is divided only by hills and rivers with no official territorial drawing of borders and boundaries. The narrative reflects the history of the region when two hundred years ago a French Jesuit priest came on a mission to find a route to Tibet by travelling through the Mishmee Hills, the geographical setting of the book. Considering the period of history in which the story is set, the book opens up to a time when oral tradition is strongly valued, forms part of everyday existence and is considered as the resource of an individual knowledge of his / her community. Gimur, a girl from the Abor[3] tribe and the female protagonist of the book can be looked at as the fictional representation of the contemporary female consciousness whose character embodies values that challenges the expectation of society from women of mid-nineteenth century. We see a narrative of this in the opening section of the book that illustrates the fear disturbing her mother as she mentions, "she [Gimur] was uncontrollable and daring, more like a boy, whistling and climbing trees and getting into scrapes" (2). In the course of the story we read of Gimur taking a hasty decision to run away with a man (Kajinsha, the male protagonist) from the other side of the hill, an attempt unexpected from a community where values deeply specified that, "if a woman looks after the house, prepares food and feeds her husband and her children she will be loved, and she will be happy" (48). The story also takes us to a brief narrative where we learn of Gimur displaying interest in the written word through the book given as a legacy by an Abor woman named Moi to whom it was given by a *miglun*[4] lady. However, this is short-lived in the book as we gradually see her union with Kajinsha and

the rest of the book takes us on a journey where orality is strongly suggested in the narrative and linguistic expressions that connotes the history of unwritten words.

Dai's books *Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *TBH* shows an interesting writing approach of juxtapositioning history and imagination. The way in which she employs the idea of returning to tradition in the material of her work is noteworthy. For Dai, her engagement with mythology is akin to sustenance and she maintain this balance in her work with a strong notion of believe that there is always history in our words, the jungle is not just a patch of greens there are voices, the rivers is not just a flow of water and that all these and everything has a landscape ("Publishing Next"). The ability to identity such markers from one's culture and make it applicable, in the extent of literary scholarship, is a reminder to reflect and re-examine the anxiety of a defined narrative. Let us consider a portion from the chapter titled "The Weight of a Stone. The Music of Heaven and Earth" where Kajinsha meets Father Krick and a conversation is carried out in the half understood and half speculated language about religion, custom, believe. Kajinsha's animist response to Krick's question about the Gods he believes in is similar to Dai's engagement with mythology in her works:

> The Tibetan lamas have books and you read your book for knowledge of God. We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on this hill, the grass and rocks and stones is saying something. And what falls from the sky—rain, thunder and lightening—are also the voices of spirits telling us something. It is how we have learnt what is good and what is sweet or bitter, by living here…for hundreds of years. (140)

Dai's literary approach towards indigenous narrative in their literary works is not only to use the oral features as deliberate technique for literary production but also importantly to give voice to indigenous memory that is silenced by narratives of larger national discourse. The oral aesthetics in North-East writings or any other aboriginal texts around the world does not end with the present engagement in the written context. It continues to evolve which, in the process of either transmitting it orally or in the form of developing the written extensions of oral texts, creates a sense of awareness towards the need to establish the oral literary culture. Oral art expressed in the written script through the description of myths and legends of the community are often portrayed with the intensity of reality, interpreted with a longing for the past, which for the indigenous writers becomes a singular process of discovery. Rajendra Bhandari, a poet from Sikkim, expresses similar feelings in one of his poem:

> Hurriedly I peep inside the mirror and find that,
>
> My prehistoric face still nourishes my primeval dreams,
>
> I feel elated that my face still carries some archaeological value.
>
> I scream- O come, excavate here, inside the wrinkles of my face
>
> And you will find that statue of a poem
>
> ditched thousands of years ago.... ("Publishing Next")

In a keynote address for "Publishing Next" Mamang Dai addresses an important question of narrative context that is often faced by an indigenous writer. She talks of the question that she often has to answer, on the presence of heavy indigenous material that appears in the narrative of literary works produced from the

North-East. Dai states in response to this that the essence of ethnicity, for an indigenous writer, is not just a definitive point for the literary works from where conversations are carried out but a means of looking at ethnicity as an approach that is personal and yet importantly a journey towards recovering the lost story. She further states in her opinion that:

> I am still searching and researching our myths but like this, I know, life becomes textured, layered, full of vibrations…it has so many subtexts…I am trying to look at this myths again to see if I will find something that could at least help me live my life with patience, grace. ("Publishing Next")

Dai's text is a reference to the many conversations and discussions that are carried out on topic of marginal literature, such as the representation of community within the material. The idea of theorizing works about ones native culture in literature signifies that writers like Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat expresses such narratives as members of cultural consciousness. The prologue of the *TBH* informs us of the important need for writers to move towards narrativizing the history of an unwritten past. In the light of such works that undeniably includes an extensive study of history as a subject works like this of Dai arrives as an exemplary tool for documenting part of an unwritten past.

> Every dawn I think all the stories of the world are connected. At night another voice tells me—no, there are more stories yet that are silent and separate. There are many lost stories in the world and versions that were misplace yesterday or a thousand years ago. Perhaps this is one or the other of them…there is another story from an unwritten past beyond the mountain wall. (ix)

The sacredness of life in *TBH* proves an evident example in a section titled "Tibet! The Mishmee Connection. Hunger" as Kajinsha remembers the geographical borders that demarcates one region from the other by the authority. He appears less concerned to the remaking of territory as for him and his people "empires and borders meant little [whose] worlds could not be divided, for they had lived in these lands for centuries, while empires had come and gone" (106). Kajinsha fixates his location to the open hills and mountains, which he identifies through the following lines:

> For us, what does it matter?...We are people who belong to these valleys and rivers. We can wander at will travelling behind a wall of mist, find shelter with a friend, and disappear with the wind like the invisible men who have no regard for boundaries laid down by any authority. (106)

The book that primarily appears as a historical documentation of a tribal community based on two major characters, Father Nicholas Krick and Kajinsha, also points to the period of colonial history and its encounter with the Abor and Mishmee[5] tribal groups. In certain sections of the book we see passages that cites a sense of noncommittal to the native traditions and cultures as we observe in the conversations and acts carried out between the hills tribes and the outsiders. Fragments of dialogues from the book are cited below, that is illustrious of the mixed inhibition that shows a reclusive, apprehensive, uncertainty of the community and yet at the same time conscious of the erasure of one's cultural and socio-political identity in the face of colonization of the Abor and Mishmee tribals.

Early on the book opens up for the readers to a segment titled "We will not come this way again" where we come across the hills people intuitive preparation against the new cultural force that

arrive at the region in 1826 with a "race of white men called the British" (7).

> 'Be ready, my son,' his father had said. 'Prepare yourself. Be ready!' But the old man had died without telling him what it was that he had to be prepared for. All Kajinsha remembered was his father's perplexed gaze and the way he lifted his hand as if trying to point to something beyond. (11)

In another section titled "Kajinsha and Gimur" there is a conscious resistance towards the influence of colonialization in the conversation between Gimur and her mother:

> 'What kind of magic are you expecting by doing this?' She lifted the book and shook it in Gimur's face. 'What are these things? Words! What are words?' she cried…'Go out and work! See how the leaves and shoots grow. Do they speak words or make a sound? No! If you work you will have no time for this idleness, wasting time with these white, dead leaves!'. (33)

The sacredness of words that indicates the authenticity of indigenous life and the reclusiveness to native existence is noticed in the section "Rendezvous. The Waters of Time" in which Marpa, the uncle of Kajinsha's first wife, admonishes Kajinsha for being ignorant about texts and the written script. The thoughts of Kajinsha cited below is a clear indication of how he, as the typical representative of his tradition-bound community and the fictional conception of Dai's close attachment to the rich orality, is a product of the mystical space where the natural surroundings plays a predominant role in defining the community's beliefs and practices.

> If I do not speak of what I know, it is because I know words can be stolen. And what is the need to say anything? Yes,

> he had words to give Gimur, but even with her he was reserved, because in this matter there was too much in his heart to say. It was good to live without too many words. If he spoke anything aloud his thoughts might lose their power or, worse, some jealous spirit might try to prevent him from doing what he was thinking. It was better to be silent and carry his words inside. (229-230)

In such narrative I observe a sense of tactful action carried out on the question of colonization and the refusal of transforming or substituting to the socio-cultural set up. Till the end of the book, Dai continues to incredibly arrest the movement of characters between history and imagination while simultaneously refusing to deviate from the narrative of colonial history that attempts to erase the history of a tribal community, as a vivid portion from the final section "The Woman and Her Love" narrates:

> 'Tell them about us,' Kajinsha had said to her that night in the jail. 'Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So, we tell stories.' (288)

Although Mamang Dai's text primarily looks at the history of a region, where the arrival of imperial force is indicative of the resultant massive geo-political shift, the narrative of this book for the purpose of my chapter looks from the perspective of the characters representation in the book, alongside the way in which the textual language is constructed in a way that implies for the readers a closeness to homeland and the story. Dai's illustrated characters represent a community who are largely resistant to change that disturbs the native culture, traditional practices and beliefs. Such narrative embraces the argument of my chapter that emphasizes on the need of a native literary space where ethnic

expression and cultural negotiation performs as fundamental material in the region's literary works.

4.4 Examining the Narrative of Ethnic Aesthetics, Indigenous Representation and Stylistic of English Language in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014)

> *The telling of some stories has been completed while some stories are waiting in the wings to be told at the right time…Every nation must be given the right to tell its stories, in its own patterns and by the proper storytellers, i.e, its own storytellers.*
>
> - Easterine Kire, "Should Writers Stay in Prison?
>
> Of Invisible Prisons"

Language carries with it several question of consideration especially when one makes a selection to write in the native language as well as in English. Works written in native language require translation, which in the process undertakes several semantic changes as Ashcroft et al. mention, abrogation / deformation and appropriation / reformation. The process of translation questions the fidelity of the original work against the translated. Similarly, in cases of re-written works the writers are challenged with the question of fidelity. An appropriate and relevant example is Madan M. Sarma's critque of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's re-writing of *Yaruingam* (1960), from Assamese to English. Sarma's essay "Redefining Global and Local Identities and Rewriting the Text: A Study of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Yaruingam*" is a literary attack on the author for the re-written version of the book, on the basis of the argument, that it lacks genuine transportation of material from the original text. The essay comes off as an attack over the re-writing of the English version of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Yaruingam* by

the author himself, whose first publication is in the Assamese language. While the re-written version caters to the interest of non-Assamese readers, Sarma's critical examination and reading of the novel as a bi-linguist draws the conclusion that the plot deviates from the original context leaving behind a huge politics of an altered history.

In relation to the earlier discourse on linguistic deliberation and its varied canvas, Amalendu Guha's essay "Language Politics in North-East India" allow me to carefully study the ideology and dogma associated with the subject of history that the study deals with. The essay on Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's *Yaruingam* re-written version states that the "process of interpretation is highly influenced by the dominant ideology and personal ideological stance" (286). One of the defining characteristics of North-East literature is the use of historical, cultural and political narratives as deliberate techniques in framing the network of the region's literary production. However, in the light of such convergence where history is a subject that cannot be ignored there is a necessity for careful documentation.

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (hereafter mentioned as *WTRS*) is written in English and hence does not require translation. I examine *WTRS* from the point of how the narrative is constructed in defining the ethnic aesthetics and the indigenous representation of the community and the region. Easterine's *WTRS* is an important text for study as it presents a narrative that allows the readers to explore a unique, almost mythopoeic, narrative of a tribal community in Nagaland. Importantly, Easterine's choice of select native words require the readers to be acquainted with the land and culture, as the mythological imagery of the book opens up to a setting that is intimately familiar to her. This familiarity of the book's narrative

that is close to Easterine's community and the 'English' language she chooses for expressing the ethnic elements can be interpreted as her choice of adopting the platform of literary production to draw an act of resistance. Easterine's act of resistance develops in her narrative participation that denies an explanation and disassociates the task of acquainting readers to the tribal narrative. Gerald Vizenor's concept of celebrating English as a vehicle of resistance in his book *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1994) echo the same approach as he says:

> English…has carried some of the best stories of endurance, the shadows of tribal creative literature, and now that same language of dominance bears the creative literature … The shadows and language of tribal poets and novelists could be the new ghost dance literature, the shadow literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance. (105-6)

WTRS tells the story of Vilie, an Angami[6] man of the Naga tribe who is a reclusive hunter obsessed with the sleeping river and the magical stone it contains beneath its waters. Vilie sets out on an epic journey in the quest for the stone. The narrative opens up to a unique explanation in the first chapter titled "Waking Dreams" where in a very precise description we are informed of two important narrative of Vilie, 1) a dream that haunted him every month for the past two years and 2) the forest that he has made his home. The spirit world of the Nagas quickly arrest the narrative as we attend to Vilie's assuring explanation of the sleeping river which so far have only developed in his dream. This assurance affirms that the conviction of the community to the world of nature is not just a story that is passed on but an aspect that journeys much beyond its mystic interpretation as these 'spiritual' activities revolve around everyday lives of the people. Consider Vilie's description of the sleeping river, "When the river is asleep, it is

completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you" (3). The indigenous narrative of supernatural belief, which is a significant practice among the Nagas, finds a clear expression as Vilie moves around the plot of the novel encountering various people, situations and places that exudes the 'other' power. The unique reverence and harmony that expresses the oral tradition is captured in a section from the book as Vilie trek through the forest:

> He tried to think of the rules of hospitality. If he took firewood or gathers herbs from the forest, he should acknowledge the owners. What was it his mother used to say when they had gathered herbs so many years ago? *Terhuomia peziemu.* Thanks be to the spirits…It was her way of pronouncing a prayer of thanksgiving to the provider, to *Ukepenuopfü.* (80)

Easterine's development of the supernatural elements in the narrative is seen in the various characters that are presented as witchcraft, heart stones, seers and forest spirit. It is important to note here, that the context of indigenous elements presented in the book relates to the beliefs and practices of the Angami tribe. Hence, the reference to 'Gods' and 'spirits'in *WTRS* is specific to the local Gods of the Naga people especially of the tribe the protagonist belongs to, Angami. Easterine's narrative choice of the indigenous oral tradition come as a refusal to adopt the narrative mode of mainstream Indian novel as she emphasize on illustrating ethnic elements through her use of language, expression and themes.

Carrying forward the discussion on the subject of postcolonial as a study that is characterized by processes of replacement, I examine how language is appropriated and disseminated according to specific cultural context. The concept of abrogation applied by Ashcroft et al. is re-defined here to look at how indigenous texts negates the use of standard English narrative and adopts "strategies of appropriation…[which] seize the language [and] re-place[s] it in a specific cultural location…" (77). The seminal book of postcolonial study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) is re-visited here to examine how the political domination of the European imperialism affects contemporary literature. As postcolonial study is a re-appropriation of content in language and literature, what it also does, as Ashcroft et al says. is that it replaces the hegemonic colonial discourse and rejects the process of the center, by granting authenticity to the ones at the margins. One of the key measure to identify the problematic of postcolonial in language and literature is to "decenter the assumptions of authority" (205) and make an essential shift in post-colonial literary theory by:

> re-placing of the hegemonic European discourse either by indigenous theory, the construction of "indigeneity" and indigenous textuality—in which post-colonial theory is implicated…or by various "strategies of subversion." (Riemenschneider 205)

The inclusion of indigenous narrative for North-East writers is a recurring theme in the context of their works. The challenge for these writers, who largely engage with local themes, is the continuous need to explain the importance of narratives that includes local essence. Writers from the region look at their embedded culture as a process of preservation and continuity of the people. This concept of continuity is essential given that the works,

which can be placed under the category of realistic fiction, re-defines permanence of culture and tradition. In an academic lecture titled "The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India" Aruni Kashyap concisely talks about the narrative representation of literary texts from the region that is often more than just an imaginative story. He refers to texts such as Lummer Dai's *The Laughter of the Earth* (1963), Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (1988), Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006). Through the examples of these texts Kashyap brings a cognizance on literary scholarship from the region that is not fixed to a restrictive narrative space of violence alone but exudes a certain sense of community cultural aesthetics in its oral narrative expression. The texts mentioned by Kashyap tells the stories about the Adi tribes complex entry into modernity, the three high caste widows in a religious monastery set in Southern Assam, or the human side of the bloody Naga insurgency. These works weaves intricate narratives alongside a distinct linguistic style that define the aesthetic characteristics that are often sidelined under overwhelming political narratives. On the idea of understanding the narrative of North-East literature as representation of realistic fiction Kashyap says:

> One of the most important mediums connecting different cultures is realist fiction. More we read about a certain people, community and the nation through their fiction, closer they become for us. ("The Peripheral Imagination: Writing the Invisible India")

This is precisely why *WTRS* is an important text to discontinue or at least blur for once, the quest for the Great (North-East) Indian Novel. The brilliantly executed ethnic details of Easterine set an image of Nagaland that is primeval, distinctly local and universal at the same time. Such expressions emphasize the

need for literary sovereignty for these writers, for whom although the region might not be sovereign in the political sense, its cultural and literary sovereignty should be established within the fictional texts.

Each chapter in the book opens up to succinct narratives of the protagonist Vilie's journey as he moves from one settlement to the other. Notably, in the plot that carries the narrative of Vilie's quest for the heart stone, Easterine conjures up the fantastic by relating the various incidents in a matter of fact tone thereby allowing readers to understand and relate to the tribal art forms and beliefs that adheres to the everyday lives of the people. The oral narrative in its diverse form of customs, cultural practices, beliefs, taboos etc. is weaved within the story of which I bring a few scattered sections from the text.

In the seventh chapter of the book titled "The Nettle Forest" Easterine brings the narrative of bark weaving activity that is diligently practiced by the women flock of the community. In the narrative of Vilie's encounter with two young girls and an older woman, Easterine narrates the cultural practice of bark weaving:

> Bark weaving was a dying art and it pleased him to see the women diligently harvesting the nettle plants into their baskets. (33)

In another chapter titled "Fever" Easterine weaves the animist belief of the community before Christianity as a religious institution came to be established. The following brief description from the text explains the people belief in animism, which the community defines as all things embodying a spirit or soul that includes animals, plants, rivers, mountains etc:

> A hundred years ago, the non-Christians customarily offered chicken sacrifices if anyone fell sick. They feared

> death so much that they would bring a chicken into the woods and proclaim, "Life for life" and release the chicken so that it cheeped all evening until it died or was eaten by a bigger animal. (54)

Sections from the book also talks about the community's belief in the world of spirits. For example, we take a look where Vilie recollects the seer's advice as he instructs Vilie the importance of the spiritual world, "Take your guns with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (31). Such spirituality is expressed in the book through the mystical existence of the universe and the man's place in it where the spiritual world is recognized through the community's cultural knowledge, and its authenticity is vouched in the belief that this knowledge comes from the communal storehouse of belief. On the extensive presence of the otherworldly universe in *WTRS*, Easterine in a conversation defines the spiritual geography as a unique narrative to the body of her work:

> The spiritual is normally not so easily defined as this or that. The book opens up a complex universe where you find territorial spirits throughout the landscape whether it is in the forests or in the fields, all a recognizable part of Naga spiritual geography. The book is also about power, and learning to exercise spiritual authority. ("Writing Nagaland – A Conversation with Easterine Kire" 2016)

The spiritual geography is further addressed in the book as we see the belief and practices of the spirit world co-existing with the community life. Few examples being, 1) the narrative of *Rarhuria*[7] the unclean forest, where human children are taken by the spirit children 2) forest songs which is a spirit song sung to

enchant humans to the unclean forests so they would die and come to live with them 3) the Screaming Stone[8] screams that followed "war [between communities / villages], or pestilence or sudden death" (141) or, 4) the teachings of the spirit words to fight against the negative force:

> Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfü fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is the greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone!. (103)

A more illustrative example from the book can be referred to the chapter titled "Tuesday Market" that gives a description of the other beings who appears as beautiful young girls at the market in search of bridegrooms. Consider the following conversation between Vilie and the old man who hosts him for the night:

> A flurry of human activity such as the market always attracts the river spirits. They are beautiful female spirits…They appear as beautiful young girls and mingle with the market people…the really dangerous thing is that they come to the markets to look for bridegrooms – young men that they can marry and make wealthy. But these men always die young.
>
> Vilie instantly thought of the two beautiful girls he had seen…But they had looked so real. And they were extremely beautiful. (122)

Texts such as *WTRS* that densely talks of the culture of oralily bring an important inquiry that raise question on linguistic identities and the form of narrative expression. For most indigenous communities from the North-East English is the writing language. This English that they write with is not the same English an author from the mainland use, who have their own languages and

literature traditions. Therefore, writers from North-East face challenges as they not only have a very restricted space in the use of language but also have to find a language for the wide range of indigenous topics that often has little or no theoretical vocabulary to capture the specific ways of distinctive. In Dibyajyoti Sarma's review for *WTRS* he mentions an important distinction that needs to be considered as he says:

> Most mainland India communities have their own languages and literature traditions. An author belonging to these communities has a tradition [of a diverse literary practice] to fall back on, whether or not the author wants to identify with it…For most Northeast authors it is a direct leap from the oral tradition to the English. (Sarma 2016)

This leap from the oral to the English often requires scholars / writers to provide extensive footnotes and endnotes in an attempt to explain the North-East to the rest of the nation or in making a context to the region's secessionist struggle. The demand for such extended narratives often controls the plot from presenting the primary subject matter, as Sanjay Barbora comments on a similar practice in reference to Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* (2014). He says:

> *Sons of Brahma* keeps explaining political and social events to the reader, thereby distracting her/him from the nuances of the story itself. This is precisely the kind of burden that editors and reviewers like to put on writers who tell stories about the Northeast. This makes it difficult to tell stories without forever falling back on bad scholarship in the history, culture and politics of the region. ("A Northeast Weltanschauung and Sons of Brahma")

However, again, the absence of such references often creates narrative misinterpretation where the spiritual activities of the community are at times assumed as occult practices. Such limited definitions makes it important for inclusion of texts like *WTRS* that attempts to bring a new literary disposition, where the narrative illustration of fantastic elements are as important as the urban settings of any non-North-East literary texts.

Easterine's oral narrative representation in *WTRS* and the succinct description on the ethnic aesthetics allow us to understand the literary space of a writer from North-East India for whom the narrative of history cannot be erased / ignored to carry out conversation in contemporary works of fiction. A significant passage from Toni Morrison's book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) require a mention here. The extract speaks of a personal inquiry into the significance of native writers in the mainstream literary imagination. This passage can be considered as an explanation to what writers from the North-East are engaging with in their works, despite their writings being critiqued time and again for its exotic and conflicting themes:

> My project rises from delight, not disappointment. It rises from what I know about the ways writers transform aspects of their social groundings into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text. And rises from my certainty that writers always know, at some level, that they do this. (4)

4.5 Preservation of Culture through Words: Examining the Oral History of Violence in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006)

The telling of a story is not only an artistic action, it is a spiritual exercise that is an integral part of the healing of a people's psychological wounds.

- Easterine Kire, "Should Writers Stay in Prison?

Of Invisible Prisons"

Contemporary texts in the field of literature, history, religion and folklore from the North-East often focus in and draw from individual experiences that comes through the oral process of narration. In the previous sections of this chapter, I bring into discussion the importance of oral narratives and how writers from the region continue to engage with such themes despite the challenges that accompany indigenous writings. Orality constitutes a universal subject matter, the descriptions of which are wholly organic, which means that they are found in villages: beginning from the family, clan and society. The strong cultural affinity of the community is proved through study where we see the dissemination of individual community belief resonating with their day-to-day activities. These intricate beliefs comprises of festivals, rites of passage; birth, initiation, marriage, death, etc., agricultural activities, spirits both malevolent and benevolent, gods and goddesses, magic and sorcery, sin and taboo and so on.

Coming back again to Cecile Sandten's essay "Ethnic Life Writing" mentioned in the previous chapter, I re-examine here the term "ethnic life writing". Based on the ethnic representation in the narrative of the texts of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier and Yvonne Johnson that illustrates the deep mythical and religious symbolic depiction of the indigenous community the writers belong to, Sandten introduces the term "ethnic life writing". She mentions Spengemann's definition of autobiography as a practice that invents the self in the process of writing and expresses her opinion

on how "ethnic life writing" is a genre of autobiography. She says "ethnic life writing" is a platform for the "writers" self-invention as a form of resistance, memory-work and self-narration in terms of a possible key to [self-] recognition and, eventually, liberation" (309). Her emphasis on understanding of the need of a literary voice, specifically among the Native Canadian women writers, is to put forward a form of self-representation in the process of finding a sense of individuality, while having to negotiate at the same time with the cultural and national affiliation. This process of identifying the self, for the First Nations or any indigenous writers, comes from recognizing the power of stories among the community and in allowing to write themselves in authorship.

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (hereafter mentioned as *THCH*) is not an autobiographical work but the narrative finds similarity to Spengemann's definition of autobiography. Spengemann's understanding of the invention of the self through the act of writing can be associated with writers' that writes from the periphery. Native American, Australian aborigine, part of African-American writings and North-East India writings are examples of literary communities that tries to achieve a sense of identity through their works and to create a platform of literary self-determination. The process of self-invention in such works is a key feature that develops through resistance, memory-work and self-narration. However, for North-East India writers, their writings often go much beyond literary self-invention and is more of an act that undergoes a process of healing. Temsula Ao's explains this in the preface of *THCH* as she mentions a painful memory of a great loss. In the process of retrieving a forgotten history she says:

> what do you do when it comes to someone else's memory and when that memory is of pain and pain alone? Do you

> brush it aside…? And if you can do that, are you the same person that you were…? i think not, and that is why,…I have endeavored to re-visit the live of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged. (ix)

THCH is a memory work of Temsula Ao that involves a process of "remembering a great loss" (ix). The ten stories develop through the narrative of memory as the stories serves as an eloquent proof for the memories of decades of "strife, guerrilla warfare, plundering" (Philip 2006). To study Temsula Ao's use of memory, as a vital theme of *THCH*, I look at Toni Morrison's term "re-memory"[9] here, although the actual narrative explanation of her use of the term for her celebrated book *Beloved* (1987) differs to how I wish to explain it with reference to my select text. While Morrison's concept of "re-memory" is to live out the memories of a bitter past of emotional and mental scars, I look at this term as a process of remembering and re-living the memories of a period of great loss caused due to political upheaval. Morrison's "re-memory" underlines the need for "re-representation of the forgotten "other"" (qtd. in "Ethnic Life Writing") which in her novel later becomes a force against which the characters struggle, as Sethe survives to the end of the text by putting the past behind her. However, this accomplishment takes place in the text through a series of the characters battle with memories, which is an important reference and reflection to this chapter's section. Toni Morrison's psychological conflict of memory reflect through characters such as, 1) Paul D. who "shut down a generous portion of his head" so that he can ignore memories of Halle and, 2) Sixo, and Sethe for whom "re-memories" are so strong that they nearly assume a reality as she tells Denver, "If you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again" (36).

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy's remarkable essay on Morrison's *Beloved* analyses the term "re-memory" in an attempt to understand the primal scenes and constructions in the novel. Through a detailed textual examination he picks out sections from the novel that sketches out events of past to justify Morrison's use of the term. In his analysis, he confirms that the concept of mental recollection is a thematic feature of not just the novel *Beloved,* but of almost all of Morrison's novels. His explanation, with reference to the narratives of Morrison, interprets re-memory resulting out of primal scenes and not primal fantasies while also acknowledging to an extend Morrison's practice of duality on constructed and remembered events in her novels. He says:

> Each primal scene has an actual existence in the experience of the individual involved…But that is not to deny the role of imaginative re-creation in the remembering of these scenes. In fact, it is precisely the space between recollection and reconstruction…that Morrison's narratives find their urgency. (304)

Analysis like this of Rushdy's defines literary narratives for text like *THCH* where fictional representation is created out of individual memory and experience. The use of memory as a thematic feature in literary works suggest the process by which narrative worlds are "increations as much as re-creations" (303).

To examine the oral history of violence in select stories of Temsula Ao, I bring in a statement of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi. This statement highlights the importance of carrying out conversation on topics that defines the region / place, irrespective of the violent and at times negative illustration of the society. Referring to the history[10] of her people (the Igbo community) she says:

> [In] a country like mine, I don't think we've quite come to the place where we can have nuanced conversations about our history. The conversations we have are coarse. That's not necessarily a bad thing – it's much better than no conversations. ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie On Fiction, Feminism")

Similarly, Temsula Ao employs the political definition of the North-East that is largely synonymous to an episode of violent history and offer a microscopic insight into the struggle for an independent Nagaland in the narrative of *THCH*. Representing violence in the context of militarization, state violence and internal conflict we see how narrative of violence and war affect the lives of ordinary people. The political history of North-East India is a narrative that continually re-surfaces in works of fiction. However, tropes common to the region, such as violence and isolation, at times, tend to concentrate on the distinct mainstream and pervasive understanding of the region. It is important to understand that the theme of violence in literary works of the region, its manifestations and experience of violence revealed is different from general definition of the region's political episode. Therefore, it is texts like *THCH* and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) that provide answer to the general assumption as the narrative highlight the specific effect of political violence, insurgency and militancy on the lives of the communities.

On pervasive representation of violence, Reeju Ray in an article "Marking an absence: Fiction from North-East India" talks about how the social and political aspects, that are characteristics of contemporary realities, are represented within a larger trope of violence inherent in the region. The topic of violence that projects an exclusionary political image of North-East in the literary works is an attempt to offer a nuanced understanding of historical events

and lived experiences of inhabitants in this part of the region. Reeju Ray points out to the works of Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* and Easterine Kire's *Mari*, that include narrative where ordinary people's lives interact alongside important historical event. To this she adds, "Violence [in the literary works] is explained not [just] as an abstract quality of the place but as materially shaping the everyday by forces both within and external to the society" ("Marking an absence"). Hence, the process of disseminating the oral archive in fictional works is important for text such as *THCH* to redefine the popular narrative and challenge the myth of violence that for a long time relied on basic assumptions.

THCH covers ten significant stories of the struggle for an independent Nagaland. Through the fictional representation of vivid characters, the stories represent the history of autonomy and resistance by drawing to the initial period of the state's patriotic fervor that led to the creation of what is now the group of insurgent bodies. The opening story titled "The Jungle Major" is set in a small and relatively peaceful village of Nagaland until the idea of freedom and sovereignty instill the minds of the simple villagers. What is seemingly an intriguing story of a "mis-matched" (1) couple gradually moves to a narrative that details a bleak political event. The dawn of a new-age (the political uprising) in the state is explained in the following lines:

> 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 of them did not even understand…The subject of independence became public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' rule. (2-3)

At the heart of such narrative that signifies the approaching violence, the plot also actively engages in providing a vivid description of the community that bring us to the lives of people that exist beyond the violent events. Alongside the uprising of a political enthusiasm, the story's focus is on the beautiful and witty wife Khatila of Punaba, whose marriage not only caused a stir among the community but also for a moment interrupted the dynamic life of the villagers: "When their marriage was first announced in the village, people stopped in their tracks, gaped in wonder at the sheer improbability of this match and tsk, tsked, some with disbelief and some in utter disgust at the thought" (1). Punaba joins the underground band and during one of his secret visits she uses her wit to save her husband from the government-employed army. In an extremely agitated situation, she smears her husband's face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth and begins to abuse him for not preforming his duties as a servant of her home. The swift action of Khatila not only saves her husband but the entire village whose arrest could affect the village "for harboring a notorious rebel [and] their barns would have been set on fire, their houses destroyed" (7).

Temsula Ao's critical appraisal of both the state and its opponents and their lost ideals is expressed in most of the stories. A close observation of her stories reveal a sincerity in the narrative as it not only expresses a one-sided approach to the political violence but critically analyzes and exposes the problem within the state. However, such appraisal often comes along as a challenge when readers interpret the narratives of politics and political events produced from the margins. In a similar direction, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi talks of the vicious cycle of how literary works from the margins that often has a historical narrative of expression are interpreted. In a ninety-minute conversation carried out to celebrate

the tenth anniversary of her acclaimed novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) she says:

> When you write realistic fiction, there's a sense in which of course it's going to be read politically [and then she further tells about how literature is defined based on where you write from] But I think there is also something that happens when you're black or brown, and people who are not black or brown read you, because then they read you as anthropology. ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie On Fiction, Feminism")

THCH brings sincere narrative of conflict and differences in the movement, while simultaneously drawing the selfish motive of the people involved within the group. Two stories from the book "Soaba" and "Shadows" take place during the late fifties as the new wave of nationalistic rage, particularly excited the young people. These young people caught at the crossroads of Naga history makes decision based on two peculiar choices: pursue studies or to do something more meaningful "to join the Naga army" (70). A section from "Soaba" state this predicament, "The wave of dissidence and open rebellion was heady wine for many of them and they abandoned family, school…to join the band of nationalists to liberate the homeland from forces" (10). Temsula Ao, through her character representation, examines the catastrophic event caused by a fall-out in ideology among the people whose commitment toward their fight for the state gradually overturns into attaining own selfish ambition. Soaba and Imli represent the young people driven by the idea of "freedom fighters" (71), caught in the romantic idealism of fighting for sovereignty. On the other hand, characters like Imlichuba and Hoito represent individuals who become perplex, unable to attain the sudden rise in position, ultimately leading to self-destruction. Both these characters in the

individual story are group commanders who create their own destructive end as their dreams of becoming a "commander and earning glory in battle, was written off from the rolls of the army as if [they] had never existed" (85).

The singular narrative of the political history of North-East India creates a myth of violence that hinders one to look beyond the definition of conflict. Such exclusive identity markers ignore the existence of a cultural lifestyle that exist beyond the narrative of violence. To me, Temsula Ao brilliantly transacts through her stories, the needed act of sensitizing readers with a normal definition of violence as against the stereotypical political definition of the region. Such representation comes in stories like "The Last Song" in which she seamlessly illustrates the picture of a bustling village where preparation is underway for the church dedication, alongside a hostile and overwhelming narrative of violence. Temsula Ao explains the motive of violence in this story through a clear representation of how state violence is a result of the dogged attitude and a large part of ideological difference among warring parties. Such representation as provided by Temsula Ao stands in contrast to the definition of violence that otherwise only projects a heavily militarized illustration of the region. Reeju Ray talks of the needed consciousness among readers' as they engage with the political narrative of the North-East:

> These works of fiction not only provide a corrective to general assumption and stereotypes, but highlight the specific effect of colonial and state violence, insurgency and militancy on the lives of the largely rural women and families of those fighting in the war. ("Marking an absence")

One of the striking features in the stories of *THCH* is the unconscious celebration of women characters who makes decisions

and takes control of situations. In this collection, the history of violence in the state of Nagaland is illustrated and represented through Temsula Ao's creation of very vocal women characters that to me, is a unique spin-off of a body of literature that writes from the margin. We come across such women characters in stories like "The Jungle Major" with the resilient female character Khatila, "The Curfew Man" female protagonist Jemtila, mentioned in the textual analysis of the second chapter, "The Night" and "The Pot Maker" etc. In "The Curfew Man" the female character Jemtila menial job as a housemaid is not to demean her observant attention towards things happening around. Her husband's uneasy activity of serving as a "government informer" (37) and his inability to quit the job due to the disturbing consequence that could follow puts her into action in the story. She secures his freedom from a sinister bondage as she rebukes him thus, "Just wait and see, one day they will get you. This woman was by no means ignorant of what was happening all around them…she had to admit that they were indeed caught in a vice-like situation" (38-39). Or, consider the story "The Night" where we come across an unusually poised woman Imnala from a small village who, despite the societal challenges, thoughtfully executes an event that would eventually decide her fate. Despite being scorned by the society for bearing an illegitimate child for the second time she is unaffected towards such rebuke as she make her choice:

> 'Come what may,' she thought, 'I shall devote my life to bringing up these two children in the best way I can. I shall finish my high school, get a job and educate them. I shall spend every ounce of my energy so that they have a better life than mine'. (54)

Similar to the women characters in these stories, "The Pot Maker" brings the narrative of a young girl named Sentila who

shows an unwavering dedication to learn the ancestral art of pottery. In spite of the difficulties associated in learning this skill, she is reluctant to the advise of her mother who suggest a relatively comfortable skill to learn. This determination perhaps is the culmination of the societies expectation of her role which she overhears in conversation carried out between her parents: "I don't know what will happen to our daughter when she grows up, she seems so reluctant to learn the craft…She will grow up to be a useless girl and no man will want to marry her" (58).

The brief exploration of women characters in this section is an important inclusion and contribution to this last chapter of my thesis. As I examine the varied literary landscapes in the narrative of contemporary women writers, I cannot ignore to look at the women characters in the texts whose presence vibrates through the narratives of each story. Such character representation by the contemporary writers is, to me, more than just illustrated characters necessary in the plot of the stories. Each character represented in the texts presents women who exercise freedom, demonstrate agency as chief protagonist.

This chapter examines the indigenous authenticities, ethnic aesthetics and oral history of violence in the select works of fiction. In textually analyzing these varied narratives I identify a multilateral approach in which the literary works from the region can be interpreted. This agrees with the problem, addressed in the thesis, of clumping the North-East India literature into one media-driven narrative of violence. The problem of homogenization might perhaps find a departure in this thesis that comprehensively addresses the distinct social, political and cultural narrative of the indigenous community. This chapter and the dissertation as a whole argues an awareness of the multiplicity of representations in terms of diversity, expressions, metaphors and other aesthetics, and in the

process narrates the history and story of a community. This complexity is aptly put by Reeju Ray thus:

> The essentialized and multiple Others leave little room to explore the ambiguity of identities caused by a long history of associations, intimacies, exchange and contact. (2015)

Notes

1. This quote is taken from a larger paper delivered by Easterine Kire at the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) conference held at Tromso, Norway from September 01-04, 2004. The full paper can be read here: http://nagas.sytes.net/~kaka/articles/art007.html
2. Ngûgî use this term to state that one of the main aims of colonization is the control over the mental space, of the colonized people, to deconstruct the basis of self-definition through the imposition of language.
3. Abor is an earlier term of what is now known as Adi. This is a term used by the people living outside the region and is roughly translated as "uncontrolled or savage" to denote the tribals reputation as fierce warriors.
4. The literal meaning of this term in the local dialect of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh is "British people" or more specifically "white people". Considering the period in which the fiction is set, mid-nineteenth century, the term also means "outsiders".
5. Mishmee refers to the ethnic group of Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, comprising of mainly three tribes, which are: Idu Mishmi, Digaro Tribe and Miju Mishmi.
6. The Angami's are a Naga tribe native to the state of Nagaland in North-East India. As distinct as the practices of each tribe of the state are, this tribe also has its own sets of beliefs, customs and

traditions. Easterine Kire's book *When the River Sleeps* is a close look at the Angami tribe as she sets the location of the book in a village where the group resides.

7. In the narrative of the book *Rarhuria* is the name of the unclean forest, a place that is home to the spirit children who look out for human children and engage them in various activities to entrap them.
8. Below is an excerpt, narrated by a character Ate, from the novel *WTRS* of the myth attached to the Screaming Stone, which is also the name of a village:

   "…there were two stones that used to scream in the evening. Mothers hid their children when the stones screamed…to protect them from whatever evil thing the stone was emitting over the village…When those two stones screamed, it was always followed by war, or pestilence or sudden death. In the later years the villagers covered the mouths of the stones with pebbles and soil and leaves. The stones were not high, not much higher than three feet, but it took a whole day of digging soil to fill up the two stones. Who knows where the openings led to, and from what secret underground chambers those sounds were spewing forth?" (140-141)

9. Cecile Sandten explain this term in her essay footnote as follow: Morrison developed "re-memory" as her style of writing, which could enable her to re-memorise human beings who would otherwise be forgotten such as the African people on the slave ships from Africa to the Caribbean/USA during the "Middle-Passsage," or the slave women who killed their children rather than have them live as slaves.
10. The history that Chimamanda mentions here refers to the Biafra civil war (6 July 1967 – 15 January 1970), a war fought to counter the secession of Biafra from Nigeria.

Chapter 5

Quantitative Analysis and Conclusion

The three core chapters of this thesis focus on distinct attributes of womens' literature from the North-East broadly categorized on the themes of representation of indigenous concepts, insider/outsider or borders and the linguistic devices deployed by the writers. Literature from the North-East has a diverse range of themes that includes among others 1) the theme of orality expressed through the community belief in myths and legends and the knowledge of the spirit world, 2) the theme of political conflict and violence narrativised in the fictional works through the lived experiences of the writers. However, I argue that these contrary yet diverse 'regional' literary characteristic features are not adequately represented in the scholarship of and from the region. Instead, a disproportionate focus on the tropes of conflict and violence overshadows (and probably erases) the very interesting use and deployment of indigenous aesthetics in the works of the women writers that I have chosen for my dissertation. In my Introduction, I call this an "aesthetic gap" in scholarly studies of North-East literature. My thesis argues that these works can offer readers and scholars a glimpse into the distinct aesthetics and narrative tropes that frame these works and distinguish them from mainstream Indian postcolonial literature.

The following three core chapters then look at distinct narratives of social, culture, political and linguistic aspects by close reading and textual analysis of the select works of women writers of the region. My thesis explores the ways in which we engage with emerging indigenous literary voices and our response to the stories by examining the relationship between traditional and contemporary literary forms.

The thesis' theoretical argument of the need to address the 'gap' of indigenous aesthetics is further corroborated using digital tools and network visualization. I will, in the later paragraphs, describe the methodology and tools used in the quantitative experiment that I conducted with primary and secondary works from the North-East used in this dissertation.

To conclude, the thesis confronts the challenges in the literary works from North-East India by locating a literary gap through a critical examination of aesthetic questions that are important and has not been addressed in the scholarship. The thesis points to and creates a space for conversation about re-routing the disproportionate focus on the anthropological and sociological dimensions of an otherwise much more varied range of works. The research arrives at understanding an important characteristic feature of indigenous studies that naturally involves an interdisciplinary focus that inclusively discusses social, political, economic, cultural, historical and ideological facets of the indigenous experience.

The distinguishable feature that unites the eight texts is the way the writers engage with the diverse themes and re-frames them in the light of a body of text that constitute a very organic study on the life of various indigenous tribes. This establishes for us, as readers, to recognize the challenge of the writers in creating a tribal network for the audience through the fictional space. An example of which we see in the narrative of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* where Vilie, the chief protagonist, introduces us in a seemingly matter-of-fact tone to the social and cultural practices of the Naga tribe. Various other characters like Vilie serve as the embodiment to the distinct practices of the community as their voice, to a large extend, play a pivotal role in understanding the indigenous narrative. The fourth chapter of the thesis takes note of the characters voice through which I examine the authors' level of expression and faithful representation of history, in the English

language, in narratives that are densely inflected with indigenous themes.

The current development on studies focused on the histories, cultures and languages of the indigenous people across other regions of the globe is interesting and exciting. This development encourages the contribution of indigenous communities of North-East India in the academics that designs and forms the idea of a thesis such as this. This perhaps is the new conversation, in the context of Indian literature, of indigenous communities in which the works of Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai – to name a few – play a critical role in the contemporary academic scene. Presently, multiple conversations from native communities are carried out inclusive of indigenous communities existing in other regions of the world. Such collaborations create interesting avenues as indigenous scholars question the move towards 'recognition' of indigenous scholarship and the dismissal of native intellectuals as mere informants. This thesis throughout the chapters engages with such questions through the literary works from the North-East, certainly still new and unfamiliar, but existing and meaningful. This study is borne to translate the principle of the thesis oft-quoted concept of self-determination into the field of knowledge production, and thus as Luis E. Cárcamo-Huechante says (for the indigenous scholars and writers) to become agents in the invention of "concepts, approaches and narratives in the linguistic, cultural, political, and historical terrains" (5).

The difficulty associated in bringing the indigenous literary voice is first in itself a challenge. Various limitations accompanied, in the thesis attempt, to find a suitable research methodology to frame the objective of the research. A large amount of the available research material on North-East studies engage with topics of developmental projects in infrastructure and hydroelectric schemes,

economic policies, issues on environmental change etc. One of the crucial challenges is the limited availability and access of secondary material. This led me to undertake a small study to show the lack of scholarly articles available in scholarly databases. The study is a graphical representation of scholarly articles on North-East literature. This analysis is performed by extracting data from two databases that are most accessed by literature scholars, Jstor and ProQuest. Under ProQuest, I generated data from MLA International Bibliography, Literature Online and Dissertation & Theses. The analysis looks at the scholarship of five well-known contemporary women writers from the North-East, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire and Mitra Phukan. In accessing the scholarly works of North-East literature, I use the individual name of the authors as keywords in the search engine of the databases. This is done so because the use of the authors name result in a more accurate search of the target material as compared to the inaccurate result in using the title of the works as keywords. The study exhaustively explores the scholarly work shown for citations and reviews, in these databases, as on 11th May 2017. Due to the very less materials in the databases, I did not use any time period and have instead used percentage for studying the number of works available, as seen in the vertical (value) axis in Figure 1.a and Figure 1.b.

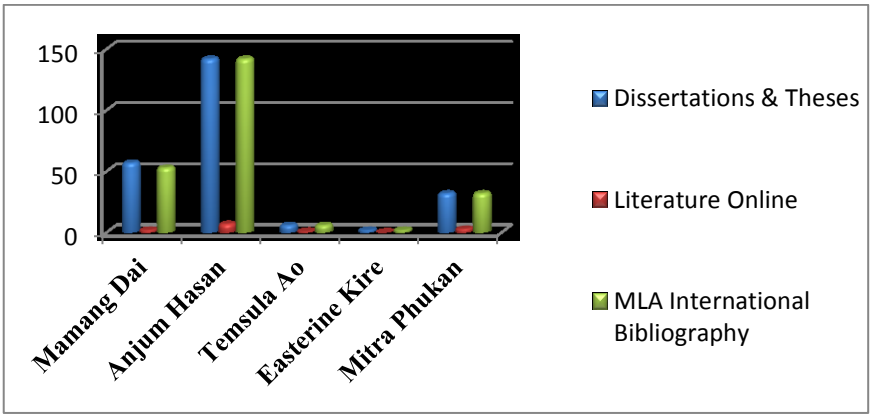

Figure 1.a: Result of ProQuest Database as on 11th May 2017 shown for Citations and Reviews

Authors	Dissertations & Theses	Literature Online	MLA International Bibliography
Mamang Dai	**57**	**2**	**53**
Anjum Hasan	**142**	**7**	**142**
Temsula Ao	**6**	**1**	**6**
Easterine Kire	**2**	**0**	**2**
Mitra Phukan	**32**	**3**	**32**
Total	**239**	**13**	**235**

Table 1.a: Results of ProQuest Database

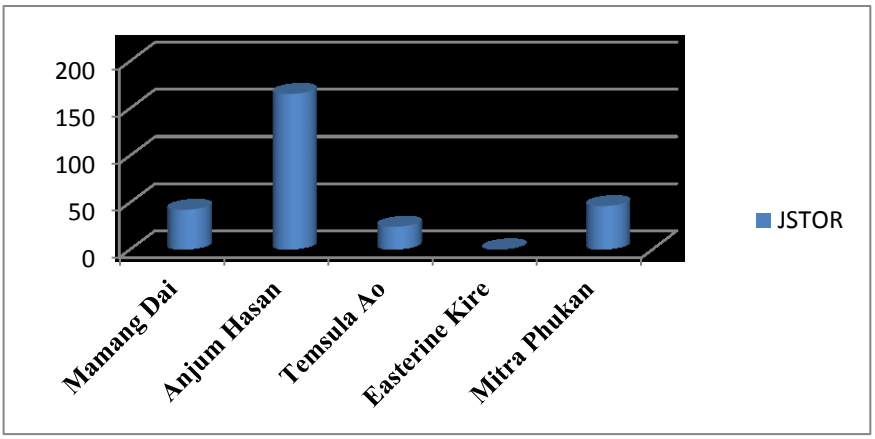

Figure 1.b: Result of JSTOR Database as on 11th May 2017 shown for Citations and Reviews

Authors	JSTOR
Mamang Dai	**42**
Anjum Hasan	**165**
Temsula Ao	**24**
Easterine Kire	**0**
Mitra Phukan	**46**
Total	**277**

Table 1.b: Results of JSTOR Database

This analysis is performed first, to give a visual analysis on the materials that are present at the academic platform for scholars and second, to understand the region's literary representation and production. As you parse through the articles it is evident that even the numbers that we see above are less than accurate as a majority of these citations are for original works of fiction and creative writing and not scholarship. And if we exclude scholarship on the general issues of the region (political and social unrest, violence, etc) we are left with a minimal scholarship on the literature of the region. This analysis demonstrates the lack of adequate scholarly work and also the difficulty of their access and availability of research. As this experiment reveal a majority of primary creative works and general topics, I further carried out a Google search for scholarly articles on the creative works by using a variety of search terms. The outcome reveals a focus on the narratives of regional politics and violence. This means that the literary works that are an illustration of indigenous aesthetics are often erased for more dominant narrative of violence and unrest that characterize the image of this region. This led me to carry out another experiment to prove the gap of oral aesthetics using network visualization.

For this experiment, I use Voyant and Gephi for creating network visualization to address the absence of particular aesthetic

devices that define the literary works from the North-East. The dataset includes three texts from the thesis primary source, Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* (2006), *The Black Hill* (2014) and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and ten scholarly articles accessed online using different search terms such as "articles on narrative representation in north-east India literature", "society culture on works of fiction of North-East India", "narrative perspective and reflection of history culture society of north- east India literature", "Narrative of social realities in north-east India literature" and "articles on Temsula Ao literary works north-east India".

I describe the methodology carried out for the experiment below. Due to the unavailability of the soft copies of the three fictional works, the entries were done manually following which the individual documents were imported in Voyant tools to extract keywords. From the word cloud, I select 47 keywords from Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam*, 30 keywords from Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and 58 keywords from Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*. The keywords such as forest, spiritual, village, women, spirits, rivers, valley, land, hills, sky, stories, words, thought, people etc represent the particular indigenous modes of narration. The generated keywords were then typed into an excel sheet in order to convert the file to CSV format. For the scholarly articles, the available PDF files were imported in Voyant for obtaining keywords, after which the same steps were followed as mentioned above. The CSV files (the three fictional works and ten scholarly articles) were then imported into Gephi to perform the final network visualization. The complete visual network is attached below.

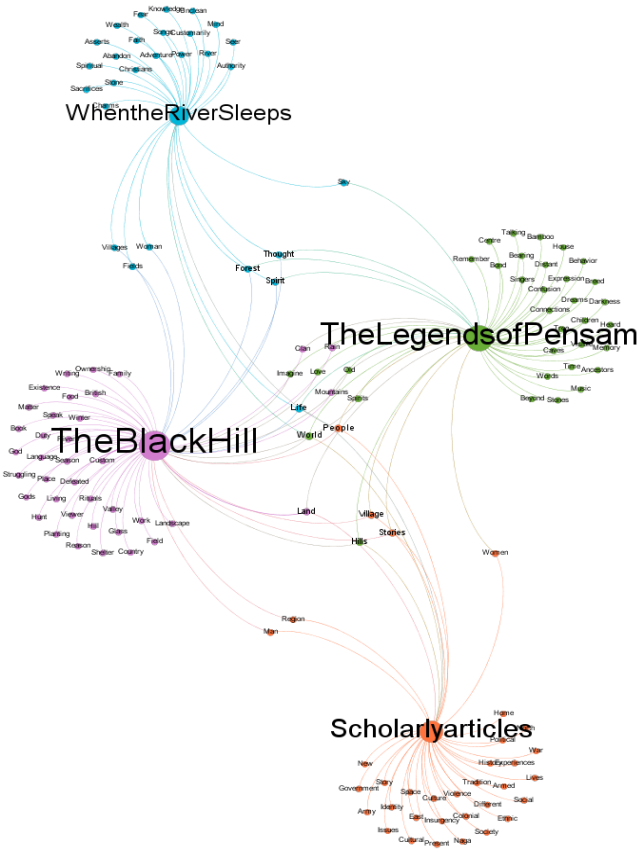

Figure 2: A visual network between three fictional works and ten scholarly articles

I expected to arrive at a result that will show negative connection between nodes of fictions and scholarly articles. However, after performing the network visualization I find an interesting result that shows an association between the literary works through three specific nodes - people, life and world. The nodes are highlighted in blue in figure 3. While the three nodes do not give specific interpretation neither to the narratives of violence and the oral aesthetics elements nor they do fulfill or bridge the gap in bringing the conversation of indigenous aesthetics in the scholarship. Therefore, the quantitative analysis is evident of the disparity in the scholarship that otherwise may go unnoticed.

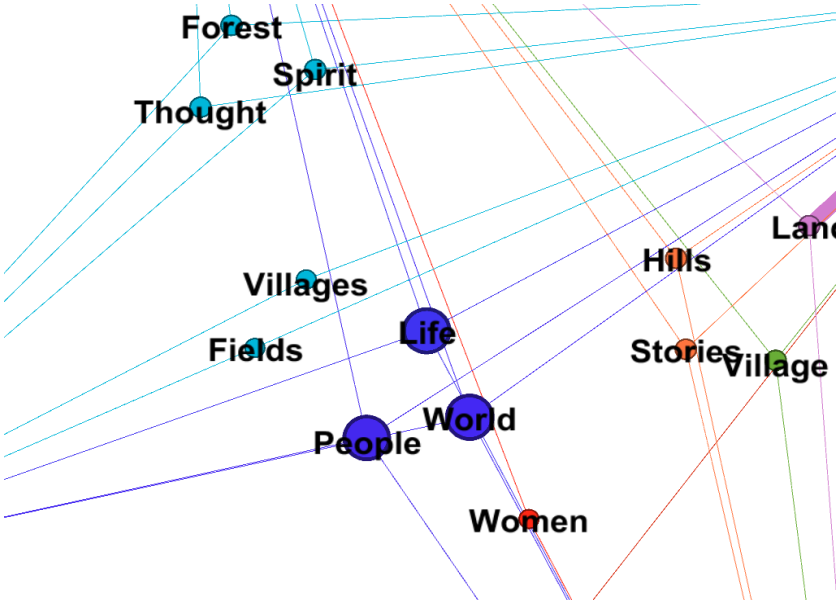

Figure 3: Screenshot of the link between fictional works and scholarly articles

The thesis arrives at some future scope of research that will allow North-East literature to integrate and intervene in the larger conversation about an inclusive and expanding contemporary and postcolonial Indian literature. Some broad areas explored and identified include the following:

1) With the field of study beginning to include and relate to mainstream literature studies, a comparative study of North-East literature can be carried out by examining how it intersects and converges with postcolonial studies. This can be achieved by bringing conversation between literary works that recognizes postcolonial literary studies as a multilateral and multi-disciplinary field of critical enquiry.

2) Various intercultural studies and comparative studies in terms of understanding the cultural beliefs and practices such as "Culture as Reflected in Achebe's Works and Ao Naga Literature" by Sentinaro, *Folk Elements in Achebe* (2000) by Easterine Kire and also the similarity observed by scholars on reading Native American texts show a possibility of undertaking comparative

studies on the indigenous cultural and literary representations. Such studies can be carried out by looking at how the indigenous communities across the world exhibit the need for self-determination through the literary platform.

3) This thesis specifically studies the narrative representation in the literary works of women writers' from the region. Similar studies can be carried out on the literary perspective of the male writers from the North-East. Writers such as Siddhartha Deb, Dhruba Hazarika, Aruni Kashyap, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Robin S Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih contributes widely to poetry and fiction with most of their works published extensively and translated in several Indian languages and western languages as well. Some of the remarkable fiction works includes Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* (2004), *Surface* (2006), Aruni Kashyap *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013) that invites the readers to new narrative landscapes that are weaved into contemporary literary themes. A comparative study between the men and women writers will also be an interesting and a new approach to understand how they address and negotiate with the issues that confronts them.

The thesis contributes to an important point by enabling us to reduce our collective ignorance about the communities generally described as 'indigenous' and to understand these narratives in more complex ways than its exoticism or otherness as just an expression of diversity. This is realized by carefully examining the distinct pattern of the indigenous social, cultural and political narrative of the region. The indigenous communities, represented in the literary works, establishes an important need to bring into conversation cultures that exist beyond the marginal space and to acknowledge its aesthetic values. This initiative perhaps is most important as I work towards sustaining the indigenous 'cultural identity' so as to allow society to better understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can inform and address contemporary

issues. My intention to create a platform to carry out discourse on the culture and representation of the indigenous community and to make it more conversant and cognizant is to re-think the possible literary parameters to conduct research on this subject.

Before I conclude, I want to underline that I am cognizant of the limitations of this work; I plan to address and expand on some of these in my future research. A lack of indigenous theoretical vocabulary specific to these kinds of work meant that I had to depend on extant indigenous theories that were useful but limiting. Similarly, while I do think that my larger argument is not restricted to women writers, I consciously choose these works as a way of managing some of the large intersection between them. I may, in future, do a more comprehensive study that includes writers across gender and race. In terms of the difficulty of access that I faced with respect to the North-East scholarship, I am currently involved in a Digital Humanities project of indexing scholarship of the North-East that I hope will become a useful resource for other scholars.

This thesis seeks an academic space in which to reframe embedded assumptions about the indigenous literary works and its narrative concern against the common tropes of violence and conflict. My central interest relates to a clear understanding that the ongoing research in a variety of indigenous communities is not to look for any preconceived set of cultural or historical convergence but to open space for articulation and expression. The purpose of the thesis is pragmatic in that it seeks to utilize current theory to address problems of recognition, sensibilities and political aspirations of indigenous communities. While this thesis is written from an indigenous perspective by using engaged western as well as indigenous methodologies it is also fashioned with Martin Nakata's belief of the strength of an indigenous doctorate (2007) that it is, in my case of study, accessible to the mainstream reader.

Appendix-A

Return of the Spirits: An Interview with Easterine Kire

Easterine Kire is a canonical writer from Nagaland, a state in India's North-East region and is one of the finest story tellers. She is the author of several books written in English including three collections of poetry and short stories. Easterine is a former guest writer of Tromsø city of refuge. She was forced to flee her home, Nagaland, due to attacks and harassment by local authorities threatened by her political writings. In 2005, after receiving information about ICORN (International Cities Of Refuge Network), Kire became Tromsø's first resident. After spending ten years in exile, she returned to her home country in 2015.

Kire published her first book of poetry in 1982 titled *Kelhoukevira*, the first book of Naga poetry published in English. She authored six books in one year of residency in Tromsø. Some of her significant works includes *A Naga Village Remembered* published in 2003, which is the first novel by a Naga writer in English, *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) etc. Further details can be found at http://www.kireediting.com/cv. Her latest work is titled *Don't Run, My Love* (2017). *Son of the Thundercloud* appeared after the great success of her book *When the River Sleeps* that won the Hindu Literary Prize 2015. She has won several awards, including The Free Voice award by Catalan PEN, Barcelona, Spain, Governor's award for excellence in Naga literature awarded by the Government of Nagaland, India, Tata Memorial Award for academic research awarded by The Lady Tata Memorial Trust,

India etc. She writes children's books and has translated two hundred oral poems from her native language Tenyidie to English. Her poetry and books have been translated to German, Croatian, Uzbek, Norwegian and Nepali.

The idea for this interview came along while working on the first major chapter of my dissertation titled Re-negotiated Space and Identity: Indigeneity and Integration where I study the need for inclusion of indigenous concepts in literature studies and look at how the concepts of community beliefs and practices, continuing and evolving cultural performances, existing myths and legends are represented within the fictional spaces where events of history underlines the literary works. The main aim of the chapter is to bring into discussion important questions such as, what is indigenous literature, how do we as readers and scholars evaluate and understand the concept of 'literariness' in indigenous texts and to further examine how the minor literary voices of the North-East are represented or underrepresented alongside mainstream literature or more specifically mainstream Indian English Writings. These questions made it pertinent to explore how writers such as Easterine Kire, who is an emerging writer in English from the North-East, understands the relevance of cultural expression of oral communities in contemporary literary society. Although, the questions framed for this interview are based on my queries in studying North-East literature, the conversation covers and includes some of the knowledge shared and exchanged during conferences, workshops and seminars with fellow scholars working in the same field and hence proves its usefulness.

Literature from the North-East is an extension of the rich archive of traditional oral art form. This art form that includes topics of indigenous lifestyle and ethnic cultural practices is new to the mainstream readers. This new narrative has often posed, to a

certain extent, apprehensiveness for both readers and publishers. This has resulted in an, often, unconscious marginalization of such writings that further underlines a dismissal of the fact that indigenous writings across the world has always had a rich literary tradition as can be seen in the writings of Native Americans, Australian aborigines and part of African-American writings. To bring a cognizance towards such narrative that possesses certain attributes that are yet to be recognized there is a need for postcolonial studies as a discipline to re-examine its theoretical vocabulary to accommodate the distinctive narrative patterns and expressions of an indigenous literary work. I reflect and re-mention here the postcolonial study carried out by Nirmala Menon and Marika Preziuso in *Migrant Identities of Creole Cosmopolitans: Transcultural Narratives of Contemporary Postcoloniality* (2014). Menon and Preziuso asserts the necessity of how the study of postcolonial must be inclusive and multilingual in which languages[1] other than English should be the choice of focus (ix). Ironically, postcolonial canon excludes writers' from the North-East who primarily write in English.

Indigenous narrative in literary works is largely an extension of the writer's cultural attachment to his / her community and hence will incorporate topics focused on communities culture and history. In the context of North-East literature, the political as well as the cultural narratives function as predominant themes as it allows the work to be firmly rooted in the multiple realities of life that surround them. This is the same for African literature, as well as texts produced from the margins, that often rely on a historical narrative of expression, where we see narrative intersection on topics of culture and politics. Examples of such works are Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) etc.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi negotiates with this narrative reality as she emphasis the importance of carrying out conversation, rather than having no conversations, on topics that defines the region / place, irrespective of the violent and negative illustration of the society ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie On Fiction, Feminism"). Indigenous literary work naturally invites an interdisciplinary focus that inclusively discusses social, political, economic, cultural, historical and ideological facets of the communities' experiences and therefore, the intersection of these narratives will be a thematic background for the writers.

Easterine well known, in her works, for her deep sense of honesty to cultural roots, asserts that the idea of canon is not important at all, as each writers that writes from his / her space writes about the place he / she belongs to. She urges us into realizing the unique narratives that belongs to each community and to be cognizant of the fact that we all come from a completely different cultural, emotional, political, economic experience and therefore should not hope to write like the other. This mediation is perhaps most urgent in the context of North-East India literature or any other indigenous texts as trying to assimilate can only lead to a narrative that will be less authentic with a lack of integrity. The unique narrative of the community should rather allow indigenous writers to create a space for shifting cultural borders and boundaries through the English language[2] that is molded according to the individual needs of expression. This argument relates to Harish Trivedi's extensive contribution and engagement in translation studies that led to attaining new perspectives on translation in relation to postcolonial societies. In his essay "Translating Culture Vs. Cultural Translation", Trivedi makes an urgent need to "protect and preserve some little space in this postcolonial-postmodernist world, where newness constantly enters

through cultural translation, for some old and old-fashioned literary translation" ("Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation").

Easterine's writings are based in Nagaland and the narratives in her texts show the deep reverence, respect and attachment she has for her home. Her writing gathers much towards delivering an authentic narrative of politics, a history of the people hidden for several decades of which can be read in *Bitter Wormwood.* The unique way in which she transports the oral narratives into writing are appreciable in the way she marries history and imagination. This intersection is so important for many reasons as it not only, thematically, forays a new narrative voice that retraces the boundaries of existing literary structure but challenges us into thinking how, as Easterine says, all written literature of all national literatures today had a beginning in their oral traditions by taking examples of some of the greatest literature of the Greek and Indian mythology. Easterine's texts such as *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud* are some examples of the shared spaces of the fictional and the folktale. In these texts, we come across characters like Vilie and Pele whose actions and movement are so surreal yet so close to the lives of communities that exists in the region, representing individuals who interweaves the myth and lore in their everyday lives.

Easterine's fiction works *A Naga Village Remembered, A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud* are all set in Nagaland with narratives that are woven into the political and cultural scapes of the Naga society. *A Naga Village Remembered* describes the battle between British forces and one Naga hamlet Khonoma Village in Nagaland while her next book *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a story of Naga childhood projected through the character of Dielieno in whose narrative we see glimpses of the community's customs and

practices. *Mari* is a novel set amidst the attempted Japanese invasion of India in 1944 via Nagaland (re-told by the author from an old diary discovered by Mari, the maternal aunt of Easterine). *Bitter Wormwood* details a dark period in the history of the state in which Easterine brilliantly records the struggle for independence from India by the Naga people. The last two books *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud* take a complete departure from her earlier narratives of politics and are based on what Easterine likes to term as 'people stories'. Both these books powerfully capture the life of the ordinary people whose lives are entwined to their beliefs which is seen in the tranquil co-existence of individual lives alongside the myths, beliefs, communal rituals and the folk traditions.

With a well-researched approach and a deep cultural consciousness to the roots she belongs to, Easterine remarks in many of her other interviews and essays the need for an authentic preservation and presentation of the ethnic elements that is gradually being washed away with the forces of urbanization. She points out in one of her essay of the 'cultural theft' in Nagaland by stressing on the ignorance of the indigenous people who "readily part with their handicrafts and information on their culture because they do not realize that it is being traded for money in an economically global world" ("Barkweaving"). She also deepens her stakes for a more inclusive curriculum structure in which subjects of history and literature need to re-examine its topics with the inclusion of North-East studies. She clearly states that Indian Universities at present needs to re-vamp its curriculum and include texts from the North-East as "so much is being published from the region, [and there can be] no excuses for Indian academia to ignore literature of the North-East region' ("North-East Literature").

In this interview we bring into discussion some important and relevant issues that exist in the scholarship of North-East writings. While trying to address the question of North-East literature in general we have also delved into the topic of Naga writings[3],a term used for defining the literary works produced from Nagaland. This is because Naga writings in English (both in the creative and critical works) have seen a massive growth in the last decade with writers such as Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija, Nini Lungalang and Avinuo Kire who have consistently contributed to the growth of Naga literature and North-East literature as a whole. The interview covers questions that are crucial to understand the unique narrative patterns and practices of North-East literature. The responses of Easterine Kire brings a fresh understanding on how tribal knowledge and philosophies can interact, inform and address contemporary issues.

Easterine Kire is currently based in Norway where she concentrates on her writing, and performs jazz poetry, across the world, with her band, Jazzpoesi and in collaboration with other artists. In December 2016, Kire visited India for the launch of her book *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) that is currently read and well reviewed for its fascinating narrative structure that intriguingly blends Naga myth of creation with the redemption story of Christ. *Son of the Thundercloud* received the Book of the Year Award for fiction at the Tata Literature Live Awards 2017, an international literary festival hosted at Mumbai India, on 19th November 2017 where publishers and writers from over hundred countries participated. The book is being acclaimed as a classic allegory of love and hope. Kire invited me to her mother's place on the 26th December 2016 where we spoke at length about her works, her writing process, her contribution to Naga literature and North-East literature at large and importantly her thoughts on the oral art form; a fundamental characteristic to the writings produced from the

region. This interview, to the best of my knowledge, is one of the few extensive scholarly conversation on North-East India literature and hence will be useful and beneficial for interested readers and the numerous emerging scholars invested in this field of study to initiate a positive dialogue and perhaps re-frame the definition of 'literary' to understand the aesthetics of oral narrative in contemporary literary works of indigenous communities. Most of these answers are recorded on phone and some sent over email.

I Watitula Longkumer: Thank you for this opportunity and congratulations on the launch of your new book *Son of the Thundercloud*. Here are some questions based on the many conversations I have had with my faculties and graduate colleagues at my institute on reading your books, and mostly my questions on this amazing and inspiring career you have in the scholarship of North-East India literature.

Let me begin by asking you a question on your award-wining book *When the River Sleeps*. . In the blurb of the book, Dr Paulus Pimomo remarks "Reminiscent of Marquez's magic realism and Leslie Silko's Native-America story-telling." I absolutely agree with his observation, especially, to Silko's narrative of not just the story-telling tradition, but also the way in which Native American writers such as Silko, Zitkála-Šá etc. and North-East India writers like you share a similar need to construct and re-construct the self-in-narrative. I would like to know your thoughts on the blurb and the intersection between North-East India literature or more specifically Naga literature and the Native American texts or even the aboriginal writings from New Zealand or Australia?

Easterine Kire: The blurb is both generous and gracious and incisive. Indeed we share much with these formerly marginalised literary areas because of the fact of marginalization and shared histories of a colonial past (with Native Americans) and the great

tradition of story-telling that we all come from, some cultures more than others. I found it immensely interesting that Prof Paulus with his wide reading would draw comparisons between Naga writing and writings from geographical areas so far from us, but so in tune with us culturally speaking.

I have been reading the writings of Edward Ahenakew, a Kree from Canada. I immediately felt at home with his narratives, as they are reminiscent of Naga storytelling with its moral and didactic tone behind each story. The taboo elements are strong as well as the action-followed-by-punishment pattern of folktale narration that is so characteristic of most folktales, but especially so of Naga folktales.

Aboriginal writers from Australia (some of whom I have met and have read) seem to fall into two groups. Some were very negative and victim-oriented and some others were positive and therefore succeeded in creating literature that transcended the colonial experience and concentrated on the beauty of tribal existence in outback Australia. That is the secret: write about your life, your people, your land, but look for the beauty in it and you will give so much more to readers in addition to your sad stories.

IWL: Your other works such as *A Terrible Matriarchy*, written much earlier, and *Son of the Thundercloud*, a more recent novel, amply projects the Naga landscape and village, customs and traditions and engages with the spiritual world. Considering the difficulties, in terms of writing, in transitioning between the oral to the written, can you talk of the challenges involved in bridging the age-old customs and tradition into contemporary literary narratives? Especially in introducing such narratives to societies that lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition?

EK: On the challenges involved, I want to add that I was very inspired by the African writers Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, more by Achebe in the way they brought over their oral narratives to the written tradition. They achieved what Raja Rao spoke of in the preface to *Kanthapura* (1938), which was to translate the reader's thought patterns so that he becomes converted into the writer's thought patterns. By using their own form of nativized English they managed to do this. They unapologetically presented their cultural world view, and did not water it down to make it more understandable to the non-African reader, but they uncompromisingly wrote their stories in such a way that the reader had to make the effort to get into the culture. That method they all used inspired me.

It calls for a sense of integrity, belief in yourself and what you are doing, and to continue on that path: that is the challenge part of it.

IWL: The influence of written literature as against the oral form comes largely due the process of the literary community's engagement with larger topics of national consciousness. This often times leads to an exclusion of literary works, like those produced from the North-East, which relies strongly on narrative of myths and folklore. This happens as the oral literary forms fails to fit into the category of writing the nation. My question is: in the context of such literary presumption how can we define the concept of 'literariness' for communities that have no literary histories? How can we reframe the definition in order to bring into discourse the significance of oral narrative?

EK: We don't have to be apologetic about basing our literature on the oral tradition. We can be proud of our great heritage. We need continual decolonising from a western tendency to judge unwritten literature as having less worth than the written.

We have to go back into history and discover the truth that all written literature of all national literatures today had a beginning in their oral traditions. So much of European literature was shaped by the Greek stories of Homer. The Arthurian legends, and so many oral stories of rural England shaped English literature – we have to remember that. Look at how much influence the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have had on Indian writing in English. I think we need to challenge literary presumptions which are based on ignorance and bring knowledgeable answers to this question. Any discourse that ignores the significance of oral narrative is ill informed. The oral is key to understanding the culture of the community and a writer needs that understanding to produce written literature. The amount of cultural information that the oral carries makes it impossible to keep it out of any discourse on literature.

IWL: Talking of the vulnerability of the oral tradition, at large, in contemporary times of rapid social changes and your attempt in documenting them in literary works, I am reminded of Ruth Finnegan's seminal work on the oral literature in Africa in which she traces the history of storytelling across the continent of Africa. The concept of oral literature, in the popular view, seems to convey the idea of mystery or that of crude and as Ruth puts it "artistically undeveloped formulations". So in such circumstances how would you define the presence of certain definite characteristics of this form of art that arise from its oral nature? How important do you think it is to understand the qualities of such literary forms?

EK: The problem is that scholars come at it from their own background and bring their own aesthetics to bear upon oral literature and unwritten literatures of other less sophisticated communities. So long as the western scholar considers oral literature as 'crude' and 'undeveloped' they won't be able to see,

not only the beauty, but the perfected art of oral storytelling. Oral narratives are actually a very highly developed form of literary expression. It is like a stage performance when you sit in a proper oral storytelling. Everything has to be in place: the fireplace, the harmony of the setting and the connection between Storyteller and audience. If any of these elements are missing, the story cannot be told. Any good storyteller recognizes that and demands rapt attention from the audience. The external environment has to be perfect as well – oral narratives need an environment of peace and stability because of the interactive nature of this literary form. The stories are community property, they are shared memory, they are the tribe's means of passing down history, moral education, rituals and cultural information, and they also entertain.

IWL: With the publication of your book *A Naga Village Remembered* in 2003, you are referred to or known as the first Naga writer in English. Do you think that being referred as the first Naga writer in English is empowering or constrictive?

EK: It is just a piece of history so I don't think much about it. I don't think we should lean back on a western tradition and make some writer the canon of our literature. We have our great storytellers in the villages, the elders who keep passing down the wonderful stories of yore to anyone who has time to listen. Those stories are the canon, if we need a canon.

IWL: Very true. So, in my research, I examine and establish that literary works produced from this part of the region is either missing or narrowly defined within the context of postcolonial literature. What in your opinion are the advantages and disadvantages of being part of the mainstream Indian canon?

EK: We writers from the North-East have to struggle for visibility much more than writers from other formerly colonized countries. It

is because mainstream Indian publishers and festival organizers either try to subsume us under Indian writing or to ignore our presence, which has happened in the 90s. Now that many North-East writers are beginning to be internationally recognized, they can no longer do that. In fact, North-East is trending and many big publishing houses are eager to pick up North-East writers.

Becoming part of the mainstream Indian canon might have the advantage of getting more readers. But I don't believe that. We are too different to smoothly blend into the body of Indian mainstream writing. North-East writing will always stick out. So it's a good thing to be seen as different because we are different and have a different literary experience to offer. Of course many areas we write about are similar and universal because we are writing about human experiences, but there is something that is uniquely North-East in the flavor of our writing which should never be allowed to be subsumed under the bigger body of Indian writing and be diluted or dissolved (There is a better word to describe this, but can't get it right now).

IWL: Can you tell a little bit more about the unique narrative weaved in your works and how you narrate / translate them in your stories (especially in terms of how you brilliantly construct a contemporary ethnic narrative voice to the work while simultaneously incorporating the regions debated political atmosphere)? Is such narrative intersection a way of putting forward a form of self-representation while simultaneously asserting 'literary' identity by way of writing oneself into authorship?

EK: I write each book differently. My first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* was a historical novel reconstructed after interviews with oral narrators on the oral history of their village. *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *Mari* use a first person narrative to tell stories

about life in Kohima before, during and after the Second World War. *Bitter Wormwood* comes from personal experiences and stories of my relatives and people known to me. For the Nagas, the freedom struggle was not secession or insurgency. They were fighting occupation of their lands. You see all these were my stories that I have lived in the flesh. As a writer it was necessary to step back and write with an objective view when writing especially on sensitive subjects like cultural life or political life of the Nagas. I had the luxury of geographical distance to do that, and maybe that contributed to what you call literary identity and writing oneself into authorship. I may ask you to explain exactly what you mean by those terms.

IWL: Sure. The previous question is based on a personal reflection to my readings of fictions from the North-East where I notice narratives of ordinary peoples' lives interacting alongside important historical event (for example, the intersection on topics of history, society, culture and politics of the region). I think that this kind of narrative engagement (where cultural and political elements intersect) is what makes the works unique and different to the kinds of mainstream texts that ride on a singular narrative of 'national' prototype. I also think that bringing ones culture (especially the oral culture) into conversation through fiction gives a distinct identity (through dialogues of ethnic elements) to any indigenous writers who recognize the power of stories among the community.

EK: Oh that is very clear now. This would be my answer.

As a Naga writer writing in a space where there is very little written literature, I feel the need to include the historical and cultural and political and religious background of the society in my writing. Therefore my protagonists experience the social upheavals that happened in our history and through them I recreate the

emotions of loss, bereavement or injustice as the case may be. I think this act of historically and culturally locating oneself in one's community and writing from it helps readers to understand why we do what we do, or why we make the decisions that we take over our lives. It hopefully helps the reader to understand who the Nagas are.

IWL: Yes. Does this process of recreating the history and culture of the community in fictional works also mean reducing our collective ignorance about the communities generally described as 'indigenous' and to look beyond its simplistic expression as 'a celebration of diversity'?

EK: I think we can't escape 'indigenous' as a term and we should not reject it. On the other hand we can use it as an embracing term to describe the indigenous peoples of the North-East India and even the indigenous community of Orissa in India. Gopinath Mohanty, an expert on Orissa's tribal languages and cultures, is an eminent writer from Orissa whose work is widely read and acknowledged. Mohanty have made remarkable effort in portraying the tribal life of the indigenous communities of Orissa and his works depicts the lives of these primitive communities that, to me, is so beautiful, simple and close to nature. He has written excellent novels on their lives. Even more interesting is the fact that Mohanty who was a serving as a government official posted amongst the tribals worked towards uplifting the tribals by protecting their right, writing, documenting and telling their stories. So our part is to keep writing for those who are interested and wish to be enlightened by our kind of writings. And this includes not the just creative writings but what scholars like you do is equally so important because I believe that the critical writing is the balance you give to creative writing, and that has to come out to explain and enrich the creative works.

IWL: Thank you for the appreciation. I sincerely believe that with the right kind of scholarly conversation we can learn to appreciate indigenous literary works that possess certain aesthetic qualities that are certainly still new and unfamiliar, but existing and meaningful.

EK: I totally agree with you. The areas and people classified 'backward' actually have so much wisdom which is relevant, revelatory and worth celebrating. I totally support your endeavor!

IWL: Thank you. This can perhaps help in creating a platform to carry out conversation on the culture of communities and to re-think the possible literary parameters to conduct research on this subject. Do you also think that a minor literature, borrowing the concept of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, can be the portion from where discourse / conversation can take place?

EK: By using minor / major as a perimeter to measure literatures with, we do it an injustice. Each literature is major where it is. So like the Africans did many decades ago, we have to start thinking Naga-centrically and apply those positive and life-affirming values in our daily lives, and our academic exercises so that the discourses will happen automatically without us even initiating it. But I am aware I have diverted a bit here. Yes it is very possible to rethink the literary parameters. Yes it is very possible for discourse to emerge out of a 'minor literary work'.

IWL: You have also authored a number of children's books published in collaboration with Barkweaver. Can you tell us about your writing practices? What according to you is the role of writing? What is your writing process, especially creative writing, in defining, projecting or recording a cultural narrative of a place?

EK: In a society like Naga society where our written literature is so young, I felt the need to chronologize our history – all that we have

gone through as a people, historical events that shaped us and produced the socio-cultural changes that we see now in place - and I feel I have done that. I also write because it is what I love to do and I believe it is my God-given role for my life. My writing process is most of all, finding a quiet place, a mentally quiet place so that means calming down, processing the areas where I can help and where I cannot and distancing myself when I cannot help, and then quieting myself and focusing on the work at hand. With all my books, I do research, interview people, and try to get factual information on the place or period of history I am writing about. If it is scientific information or botanical information, I interview the relevant persons.

I write poetry when I need a break from non-fiction and fiction writing. It's about finding a spot by the water and watching birds or boats, or sitting in a café and feeling inspired.

I write children's books because I want to engage with the imagination of young children and for Naga children, I want to give them some books by a Naga writer which teaches them about the visible components of Naga culture such as the Log drum, the folk dancing etc. so that when they are questioned by an outsider, they will be able to answer them confidently.

IWL: All your works are so commendable and I am sure many readers feel the same. *When the River Sleeps* is a wonderful book of which I felt that the introduction to the spirit world was so important, to allow society to better understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can inform and address contemporary issues. What was your writing experience like to deal with a story where there is a complete absence of the political narrative?

EK: Purely liberating! I feel quite done with the political dialogues. There is so much of the spiritual and supernatural to be explored

and we have that in our culture. One only has to go deep inside oneself, back into childhood or young adulthood and draw out all those wonderful stories. My hunter friends and their amazing stories of sleeping rivers and enchanted stones inspired *When the River Sleeps*.

IWL: *When the River Sleeps* deal with a very powerful narrative that specifically or I would like to say, completely devotes to the oral tradition of story telling and deeply explores the Naga spirit universe. What inspired you to write on this?

EK: Much before this came along I published a collection of true stories called *Forest Song* in the year 2011. They are stories collected from people's experiences. The way I see it, we not only have these spirit stories that are so marvelous, we are also a people who draw life lessons from the spirit world a lot. You will see that the protagonist Vilie learns to unlearn what he has been traditionally taught and he overcomes fears that all of us harbor. So it's a combination of wanting to explore and reveal the Naga spirit universe, and what we can gain from exposure to this invisible other level of our existence which has so much to offer.

IWL: Why do you think it is important to have texts that are about these elements and images of superstitions / supernatural and other story-telling tropes. Is it even relevant in the current time of turmoil / unrest?

EK: That is exactly it. To dismiss them as superstitious is to deny them existence. I believe modern man's denial of the spirit part of him has contributed even more to the turmoil and unrest. There are spiritual lessons we need to heed because they help us build a better world, and we become wiser persons with an opened up consciousness that is much more able to deal with crises than when we just try to meet it in the 'flesh' as it were.

IWL: In an interview with Prof Temsula Ao, couple of years back, we talked about the limiting parameters of North-East literature that is often defined / associated with topics of regional political violence and conflict, which evades / erases the other facets of a multicultural society. To this, Prof Ao responded by stating that the readers that equate North-East literature to these topics alone have a "limited imagination". How would you respond to these kinds of limited observation?

EK: Madam Ao is absolutely right. Some readers and publishers and the national media create their own expectations from North-East writing. It is an infuriatingly condescending attitude. I have been heckled by a 'scholar-reviewer' who complains that *A Terrible Matriarchy* did not engage with patriarchy of Naga politics. Even in national seminars there is always a person or two who get up and ask, "So you think you are outside India? You think you are not Indian?" and others who try to define the North-East back to me. That is the whole problem: they have their own definition of a North-East that is always violent and bloodthirsty, a 'North-East is burning' stereotypical image fed by what a friend of mine calls, National mad-ia and not media. So as Madam Ao says, their imaginations, if they have any are limited to the stereotypical images that their TV screens feed them and they should not be allowed to define what writing from the Northeast is like or should be like!

IWL: Sure. So, what can be the possible solution, if any, to bridge such gap, if not resolve, to such stereotypes?

EK: One is that, there is a group that always wants to 'otherize' us. So, when confronted with their own definition of the North-East it is important to point out their motives of otherizing us. I feel that in some ways, our culture often times limits us to respond resentfully as we are brought up in a close community that strongly emphasis

on being ‘polite and respectful’ to others. And, these values bother me at the back of my head, all the time. I think sometimes its best to ignore that voice [laughs] and just be honest to them from disallowing them to look at us as outsiders. Usually, I tell people that we are a nation in our heads. And the other thing, we need to do, is to create awareness to the readers of the materials we use as narratives in our creative works, which is definitely historical, and not fantasy. I think it is important for the mainstream readers to look back into their written history and see what it tells about the North-East, which again might have a different story than ours which can possibly be wrong because it is not Indian historians but Chinese historians that have written about the North-East.

IWL: Besides being a poet and a writer you perform jazz poetry with your band Jazzpoesi, an art form that resonates so much in terms of ‘performing’ the oral literature. Is this a way of, again, disseminating the scholarship of oral literature through a different medium in order to arrive at a full realization of the oral form as an integral part as a work of art?

EK: I don’t really try to prove anything with my jazz poetry. We are a group of artists who love working together, in all the three bands I work with, Jazztri in Delhi and Black on White in Tromsø. For us it is about inspiring each other with what we bring to our interpretation of the poems. Most of the performances are improvised so things happen on stage, which we have not rehearsed. It’s the thrill of the unexpected that makes Jazz poetry so close to my heart, and the ability to connect with the musician is very satisfying.

Of course, the word, the text is all important here and the music creates moods that reflect the text.

IWL: Finally, the stories you weave into your books tells me that your life is an amazing tapestry of moments and thoughts which today encourages many scholars like me to work on North-East India literature. Your latest book *Son of the Thundercloud* is a beautiful story based on a mystical Naga legend. Would you like to briefly tell us about it?

EK: Thank you so much. My new book, *Son of the Thundercloud* is published by Speaking Tiger. I had always wanted to write this book about the Naga equivalent of the miraculous birth of the Christ-child and picture him growing up as a Naga boy getting his hands dirty with mud from shaping pellets for his catapult. It is a book, which my publisher at Speaking Tiger, describes thus: love and life are eternal. This is what the protagonist, the traveller in the book, finds out when he meets two ancient sisters and the woman who births the rain-drop son, so called because his mother was impregnated by a drop of rain. So far many good reviews have been written on my new book and that pleases me no end!

The above questions are some important and relevant issues that exist in the scholarship of North-East writings which I observed during my doctoral study. It covers some questions that I have been attempting to find answers to, such as finding an approach towards understanding the 'indigenous' beyond its simplistic expression as 'a celebration of diversity.' The following responses of Easterine Kire have expanded and enriched my outlook toward this fascinating body of work and allowed me to understand how tribal knowledge and philosophies can interact, inform and address contemporary issues.

Notes

1. While Menon and Preziuso's central argument is for an inclusive 'linguistic' diversity of postcolonial geographies, I establish this

point to make a common emphasis on the need for a more inclusive postcolonial study as a discipline. Contemporary literary works from the North-East are written in the English language. The problem of recognition and acceptance for North-East literature is not the language in which it is written but the language in which it brings an expression that is less familiar to the readers and therefore, it is important to establish a ground to recognize the distinct indigenous vocabulary existing in the Indian literary postcolonial spaces.

2. This means creating a linguistic space whereby each writer should be able to use the English language to compliment with his / her form of creative expression. It is synonymous to what Salman Rushdie states in his essay "Imaginary Homelands" in which he emphasize on the need to reconstruct "new Englishes" (1992) by remaking the colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience. Mitra Phukan, a writer from the North-East, also reflects on a similar argument which gives a more comprehensive explanation to my point. Phukan in her essay "Writing in English in the North East" talks of the several "Englishes" (2013) being forged in the work of writers in English from the region. Her discussion is based on how the writers from the North-East, as compared to other Indian writers in English, exhibit a level of comfort and authority in transforming their narratives into their unique collective "Englishes". In the light of trying to ascertain what a folk or a mythical element is to the author and what may seem to be less ethnic to an outsider, these writers shape the English language according to his or her own unique way, with the demands of the material that he or she is working with. This is so important because while inventing their own form of English is a Pan-Indian postcolonial phenomena, the writers from the North-East

are making this transition from the oral to the literary without the mediation of another writing tradition.

3. Naga writings' is a term used for defining the literary works produced from the North-East state of Nagaland. Some of the noted writers from the state are Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Nini Lungalang and Monalisa Changkija who are considered as important contemporary literary voices from the North-East. As much as I have tried, in this interview, to bring discussions based on North-East literature our conversation mostly leaned towards Naga writings because of the fact that Easterine Kire's creative works is written from her knowledge of the Naga community she belongs to and also given the distinct social, cultural and literary narrative of the eight states, it was nearly impossible to offer a definitive answer that would apply to the varied literary narrative of the eight states.

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