

THE TROPE OF VIOLENCE AND LOSS IN NORTHEAST ENGLISH LITERATURE: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF SELECT MALE WRITERS

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Abstract:

India's northeast is one of the hotspots of conflict and violence. It comprises of eight states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. This area is also known as a land of diversity as it is home to people of various linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. However, in spite of its unique features with lot of potentials and prospects, northeastern region presents a complex situation in which conflicts and violence are regular occurrences. The search for root and identity which is one of the most important themes of postcolonial literature finds its appropriate place in northeast literature as well. Another reason of socio-political turmoil in northeast is the sense of geographical and political alienation that the northeast people suffer from. The literature from this trouble-torn northeast reflects such socio-political issues of the region resulting in violence, loss of identity, and loss of life.

Key Words: Conflict, violence, volatile, ethnic, heritage, root, identity, isolation, nostalgic.

Introduction:

The Literature from Northeast India highlight various socio-political issues confronted by the people of this region. Almost all the writers deal with certain social aspects of common interest such as volatile political climate, insurgency, conflict, violence, geographical isolation, ethnicity, identity, and backwardness of this region. Among these, the theme of violence and loss gets a more prominent coverage by the northeast writers writing in English. Tilottoma Misra in her introduction to the book *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* remarks, "Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'live with it' as they are expected to do the distant centre's of power" (xix). The writers from the eight northeastern states express their concerns with violence and human rights violation in their respective states. The recurrence of violence has made the life of common man extremely miserable.

Objective:

The main objectives of the study are:

- a. To find out the causes behind the conflicts and violence in northeastern states.
- b. To observe how the conflict situations are reflected in the writings of the northeast writers writing in English.
- c. To observe the impacts of such violence in the life of common man as delineated by the writers.

Methodology:

It is a cumulative study of historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. It is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the literary texts written by the select writers. The secondary sources are the books, journals, papers, and research articles, reviews written on the works of the select writers considered for the present study.

Analysis:

Like the literature from other parts of the globe, literature from India's northeast also reflects the burning socio-political issues of contemporary society. Violence and loss have been the recurring motifs of northeast Indian writings and especially, the writers writing in English have focused on these themes as areas of special interest. Moreover, an intense sense of loss experienced by the people of northeast in the backdrop of insurgency and counter offensive activities of Indian army is also highlighted by the writers of this region.

Robin S Ngangom is one of the renowned Indo-Anglican poets hailing from Manipur. He is a bilingual poet who writes in both English and Manipuri. His books of poetry include – *Words and Silence*, *Time's Crosswords*, *The Desire of Roots* etc. Robin employs clean and fresh images that delineates melancholic presentation scenes which is very similar to that of Jayanta Mahapatra. Similarly, in other poems such as *This stranger*, *My daughter*, *The Landscape of Return*, and *The Faces*, the poet gives a sorrowful overview and a desperate attempt to find his root and identity. Although, the poet lives away from his homeland, he is always fascinated by the flora and fauna of both Manipur and Meghalaya. His poems celebrate the beauty and bounty of nature while highlighting the traditional lifestyle of Manipuri people which is in a state of transition. He exposes the gap between the traditional world and the modern and tries to re-establish the unique identity of his people which has been denied so far by the mainstream people. His another poem *The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom* reflects the poet's concern for freedom of individuals who prefer to live in peaceful, friendly atmosphere which "the enemy of the people" have tried to destroy. Through this poem the poet exhibits contemporary life in Manipur through its various manifestations of history, culture, and politics

That all is not well in Robin Singh Ngangom's home state Manipur is quite evident from his anxiety reflected in his poems. Regarding the violent developments in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, Robin writes:

There is something sadly inevitable
About this land, something inescapable,
Like a beast which stalks its own death,
Like an ominous prophesy

(Ngangom 63)

Robin S Ngangom feels proud of the natural beauty and rich cultural heritage of his home state. However, he expresses his grief for the destruction of ecology and loss of human values. In his poem *When you do not Return*, Robin uses the personal pronoun 'you' to represent the traditional values of Manipuri society which are fast departing from the society. Therefore he pleads:

...Asking you
To return to the hills, on
Grey pages I send you happiness
Because it has left my home.

(Ngangom & Nongkynrih 200)

Thus, it becomes quite clear from the poems that the common people are trapped in the web of violence and deadly clashes between warring factions. This has resulted in chaos and panic in the minds of the people who are victimized for no fault of their own.

Dhruba Hazarika is another prominent male writers of Northeast English Literature who has dealt with some major social issues of northeast. His novel *Bowstring Winter* is the writer's reminiscence of his past life in Shillong. The novel records some nostalgic moments of Shillong in the mid nineteen seventies which includes love, friendship, loyalty, treachery, and also violence and murder taking place in some volatile moments in the history of Shillong. In another novel *Sons of Brahma*, the novelist portrays an authentic picture of contemporary Assam and its burning problems of Asaam. Through the character of Jongom Hanse, the protagonist, Hazarika highlights the sufferings that the students had to undergo during the trouble torn of years of separatist movement initiated by United Liberation Front of Assam. In the novel, Jongom, a devoted Physics scholar, is entrusted by the rebel leader Anjan Phukan a risky and serious responsibility of writing for the cause of their separatist movement. When Anjan Phukan is shot dead by the army during his second meeting with Jongom, the latter is held responsible for the killing of the former. Thus, after facing double threats both from the Indian army and the separatist organization, Jongom is compelled to leave the university campus. The novel also contains some elements of a thriller such as attacks and counter attacks, search, arrest, threat call, fake encounter, killing, bloodshed, and surrender etc. The novel delineates the brutality and murder perpetrated by the terrorists during the turbulent time of Assam's history.

Desmond L Kharmawphlang, a poet and folklorist from the northeastern state of Meghalaya, makes an attempt to explore the rhythm of oral literature which binds the various tribal communities harmoniously. In his poems, the poet shows his concern for loss of identity of Khasi people and therefore, Desmond makes use of the myths which are inseparable part of ancient Khasi society. He also speaks of the insider-outsider divide which lies deep rooted in the minds of the northeastern people. In Meghalaya marriage between girls of tribal communities and boys from plains are not allowed and this apprehension of the people regarding the plainsmen is clearly delineated by Kharmawphlang in some of his poems in which he equates the people from the plains with the British as being aggressors and oppressors.

Literature around the world has emerged from the oral tradition. Myths and legends are often foundation of many a great literature. In northeast, diverse folklore has provided raw materials for augmenting the

emergence of Northeast Indian writing in English. One of the path breaking works of Oral literature is S.N. Borkakoti's *Tribal Folk Tales of Assam* which encapsulates many tribal folk tales of Assam. In this work the writer has compiled one hundred and twenty nine folk tales belonging to the tribes such as Karbi, Khasi, Jayantia, Dimasa Kachari and Garo, Lushai, Thado Kuki, and Zeme Naga. The author has included ten Karbi folk tales and eight of them were transcreated with the help of Mr. Longkam Teron.

The history of the insurgency in northeast has been deftly presented by Sanjoy Hazarika. His book *Strangers of the Mist* is based on his own personal experience. Here the writer written extensively on the issues like illegal migration, economic deprivation, exploitation of resources, and the diverse tradition and culture of this region. One article in the book "Nagaland 1000 years in a lifetime" highlights the Naga underground movement and its consequent conflicts and violence. The article gives a vivid description of Angani Zapu Phizo, the chief of the Naga insurgent movement. Hazarika describes him as a little man of hardly more than five foot height and one who is always surrounded by books. From this description the readers can form an idea about the true character of the short statured powerful man who dared to wage a war against the mighty Indian army.

The theme of violence and loss find adequate representation in Siddhartha Deb's writing. His novels highlight both internal and external conflicts in the contemporary society. His novel *The Point of Return* reflects the turmoil and uneasiness prevalent in the Khasi society due to ethnic disharmony and its negative adverse impact on the life of the people. Especially, the prejudiced relationship between the tribal and non-Tribal population and the intolerance and violence such as brutal killings of the non-tribal people find authentic reflection in the novel. Another novel *Surface* uncovers some vital social issues like insurgency and ethnic clashes which resulted in violence and loss of life and property, and loss of traditional values. The novelist here shows Meghalaya, a northeastern state, as a dark place in which the insurgents, businessmen, and the army formed an unholy nexus giving rise to exploitation and domination over the innocent people of the state.

Aruni Kashyap is an Assamese writer writing in English who has highlighted the clash between Indian state and the armed rebel groups. Although, some critics have accused him of taking side with the armed insurgent groups, Kashyap seems to be more interested in a reconciliation between the two warring groups through dialogues. His novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* portrays a dark period of Assam's history in which the cases of human rights violation were very common. There are terrifying descriptions of mutilated dead body of ULFA militants, bloodshed, and other violent clashes.

Conclusion:

The people from the northeastern part of India has experienced an acute sense of awareness of the loss of ethnic and cultural identity. This region is characterized by a unity in diversity as it is a home to an amalgamated population belonging to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the northeastern states are plagued by socio-political problems like insurgency, terrorism, ethnic clashes, suppression and oppression of indigenous people by outsiders etc. The common people of this region are the worst sufferers in this volatile situation. The socially conscious writers of northeast, therefore, attempt to portray their first hand experience of the terror, violence, attacks and counter attacks taking place in the contemporary society and displays their concerns for the degradation of ethnic values, and loss of identity of the northeastern people.

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