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Literatures Of North East: An Analysis.

Babul Sarkar
G. L. Choudhury College

Abstract:

'North-east' is an umbrella term, a uniform phraseology which collectively refers to the eight Indian states— Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim commonly known as North Eastern Council (NEC). It is a wonderful place, a frontier territory, an onto-teleological concept that encompasses cultural, lingual and socio-political differences. From the view point of political convenience, North-east is marginalized in case of issues like border, boundary, identity, center, mainland, nationality and the likes. In the words of Bibhash Choudhury, "the idea of North East India can be seen in terms of geographical location as it encompasses a specific territorially defined space of the country."

If we look into the literary situation of North East India, we must go back to some historical events such as the Bhakti Movement, the beginning of British Colonialism, the advent of the Christian Missionary, the imposition of Bengali language on the Assamese people, the Assam Movement and the likes. These events had tremendous impact on the socio-political, religious and cultural aspects of the people of North East. This cultural loss and instability are remarkably reflected in the following lines from Tilottoma Misra's book "The Oxford Anthology of Writings From North East India: Fiction":

"An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north eastern states."

Key Words: Literatures, North-east, NEC, Marginalized, Identity, Cultural loss

Introduction:

North East literature is not merely an ethnic writing but it embodies a process of cultural memory and shared history and tradition which helps one to understand the multi-lingualism, multi-culturalism and as such the pluralistic features of North East literature. This is emphatically highlighted by K.C. Baral in the following lines:

"The emerging literatures from the North East are variously critiqued as ethnic writing, lacking in history and tradition and often subjected to the virtual diatribe that lacks in aesthetic virtuosity. These critical opinions are at best paternalistic and at worst, smack of ignorance in understanding the societies and cultures of the North East."

North East region has been rich in oral tradition in form of folklore, myths and legends shifted orally from one generation to another. "These oral tradition", according to Desmond Kharmawphlang, "becomes indistinguishable from literature and it rightly forms the foundation of literatures of North East." The present day writers of North East literature are integrating the story telling tradition in their works using English language for its global and universal properties. Bibhash Choudhury calls this "an interfusion of modernity and tradition." For Example, Mamang Dai's 'On Creation Myths and Oral Narratives' is a wonderful write-up on the creative and narrative tradition in the North East where she explores the dynamics behind the creation myths and its oral mode of transmission in cultures of the North East.

Discussion:

We can have the best idea of the literary situation of North East India by going through the literary works of the representative writers of this region. To start with Assam, the works of Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika and Aruni Kashyap primarily revolve around issues like violence, insurgency, homeland and the Assam Movement. Set against the backdrop of insurgency in Assam and consisted of twenty-five chapters, Mitra Phukan's novel "The Collector's Wife" (2005) deals with the changes in the lives of Assamese people due to violence, militant activity and disruption. Based on the Assam students' agitation of the 1980s, the novel portrays the protagonist Rukmini's confrontation with questions of identity, security and self-determination. Her life is criss-crossed among illegal migration, kidnapping, extortion, political instability, violence and murder which reigned the time. The situation became so worst that "Nobody discussed academics, nobody discussed the subjects that they taught. None of them seemed to be interested in the fact that the students they taught were involved in demonstration and protests to evict illegal immigrants" (Chapter eight).

The Assam Movement resulted in the formation of the separatist group ULFA demanding the sovereignty of Assam. The central government deployed the Indian Army to bring this insurgency under control. In addition to this, the implementation of AFSPA made the military-militancy conflict worse. This situation finds faithful presentation in Aruni Kashyap's novel 'The House with a Thousand Stories'. We are told how Mamoni, the protagonist of the novel, was inhumanly gang-raped by four military men when she went to wash clothes in the Pokoriya river. Another important novel that centres around insurgency, killings and molestation of innocent lives is Dhruva Hazarika's 'Sons of Brahma.' Conflict also constitutes a seminal feature in 'Rebirth', the debut novel by Jahnvi Barua that deals not only with external conflict but also with internal conflicts through the character Kaveri, the protagonist of the novel.

As regards the literature of Arunachal Pradesh, Mamang Dai who belongs to the Adi Community and Yumlam Tana who belongs to the Nyishi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh are the representative poets and novelists. Mamang Dai's notable anthologies of poetry are 'River Poems' and 'The Balm of Time'. Majority of her poetry deals with river, water, forest, land and voice of protest. The poem 'Tapu' deals with ritual dance whereas 'Jingles' talks about Itanagar. In the anthology 'River Poems' Dai uses 'river' as a metaphor to compare the life-spirit of her people with the ever-flowing water of the rivers. Her poetry is also a reservoir of the fear and an intense desire for peace because of violence and bloodshed experienced by the land, hills, forest, river and the Adi tribe. Here, she presents nature as a mysterious entity enriched with memory and myth.

Mamang Dai's notable novels are 'The Black Hill', 'The Sky Queen', 'Stupid Cupid', 'Mountain Harvest: The Flood of Arunachal Pradesh' and 'The Legends of Pensam.' 'The Black Hill' earned her the Sahitya Academy Award. But it is 'The Legends of Pensam' that testifies her originality as a writer. Comprising of four sections namely 'A diary of the world', 'Song of rhapsodist', 'Daughter of the village' and 'A matter of time', the novel chronicles stories to describe the struggles and predicament of Adi people both in the pre-colonial and post-colonial period. This is beautifully done by Dai by primarily recounting on memory, tradition, myths and legends of the people belonging to the Adi community.

Yumlam Tana's powerful poetic voice articulating the anxieties and other worried concerns of the Nyishi community is found in full bloom in his two poetry collections- 'The Man and the Tiger' and 'The Wind also Sings.' 'The Man and the Tiger' reminds us of William Blake's famous poem 'The Tyger' and asserts the inseparable bond between Man and Nature by presenting the tribal belief, folktale and myth that the Man and the Tiger were born to the same parents. 'The Wind also Sings' deals with themes like identity of the tribal people, racial issues and the insider-outsider conflict. In these anthologies, while portraying the customs and beliefs of the Nyishi community, Yumlam Tana resembles Nissim Ezekiel in his presentation of Indianness in the poem 'Very Indian Poem in English.' Besides these two poetic verses, Yumlam Tana is also known for his fictional work 'The Place Where the Rivers Meet' that deals with the theme of revenge that linked the people of Nyishi tribe to their ancestors as well as to their land.

If we move towards the Writings of Nagaland we witness writers dealing with tribal concerns. Temsula Ao, the Sahitya Academy Award winner, is the most remarkable writer in this respect. Her writings are associated with the process of transition in tribal lives. The past of Nagaland is full of conflicts and predicament. Temsula Ao's writings amalgamate this past with the present thereby highlighting the complex process of transition. This point is evident in her magnum opus 'These Hills called Home, Stories from a War Zone.' It is a beautiful collection of ten stories namely 'The Jungle Major', 'Soaba', 'The Last Song', 'The Curfew Man', 'The Night', 'The Pot Maker', 'Shadows', 'An Old Man Remembers', 'The Journey' and 'A New Chapter.' All these stories are set in the background of the Naga freedom struggle that was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s. Violence is the core thing in Aao's narratives that left its impact on the young as well as the old, men as well as women. But what is important to discover is that through these stories Temsula Ao conveys the message that such violence, such battles can only victimize the the people but can never establish them as champions. Therefore, in her writings Ao is optimistic of a day when Nagaland enjoys freedom and peaceful life coming out from the shackles of violence, oppression and insurgency:

'I hear the land cry,
Over and over again
Let all the dead awaken
And teach the living
How not to die'

As regards the writings from Meghalaya, three poets from post- independence era deserve mention here. They are Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Robin S Ngangom and Desmond L Kharmawphlang. Their poetry brings to the fore the political issues that pester the lives of the Khasi people. Two poetry collections namely 'Moments, Secular Poems'(1992) and 'The Sieve, Love Poems' by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, the recipient of the Northeast Poetry Award and Tagore Fellowship, bear true testimony to this point. 'Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast' is a joint venture by Ngangom and Nongkynrih. In the Editor's note to this work, the two authors have beautifully highlighted the difference between the Northeast and the mainland India by arguing that the expressive concerns of the writers from the Northeast cannot be the same as that of the writers from elsewhere in India and that the writers from the Northeast differ from their counterparts in the mainland in a significant way because they live with the menace of guns which makes him aloof from verbal wizardry and the sense of aesthetics. This is clearly suggestive of the fact that the poetical works of Ngangom and Nongkynrih are purely political. As a result, the use of romantic lyric in their poetry is very often grounded in crooked political agendas. Hence they are very often criticized as being political in approach rather than artistic. In their poetry, the lovers of men and women are also projected as lovers of the land perturbed by political stigma. Instead of exploring the aesthetic value of nature, their poetical works powerfully projects nature as an entity characterised with politics, history and mythology. For example, in the poem 'The Conquest' Kharmawphlang highlights the socio-political aspects of the Khasi people by presenting their wrath at the crushing impact of Colonialism on their serene lives. This is beautifully suggested in the following lines from the cited poem:

'Quite suddenly, the British left.
There was peace, the sweet
smell of wet leaves again.'

In his poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom", Ngangom talks about the 'wheel of fire' which symbolises the difficult living and the dangerous existence of the tribes of Meghalaya. Naked violence, murderous history and malice all around at the face of political instability find a transparent expression in the following stanzas:

"This is the story of my people
 We sowed suspicion in the fields
 Hatred sprang and razed the crops
 Now they go to gloating neighbours,
 begging bowls in hand,
 fingers pointed at each other.
 This incessant bickering
 muffles all pity.

Our intentions are clear
 Slash and burn,"

The analysis on the writings from Meghalaya will remain incomplete without mentioning the significant writings of Ananya S Guha, Indari Syiem Warjiri, Anjum Hasan, Gwyneth A Mawlong, Paul Lengdoh and the likes. In his two anthologies of poetry, 'Now, Then and Again' and 'I am not a Silent Poet', Ananya S Guha deals with the themes of anger, disappointment and helplessness of the Khasi people at the backdrop of the political upheavals. In the poem 'The God of Revenge', Warjiri powerfully portrays social reality, merciless brutality, militant nationalism and ethnic conflict as reflected in the following lines:

"I do not call you 'brother'
 who wage war on children and watch
 as they
 choke in silent anguish"

Anjum Hasan is primarily known for her two novels- 'Lunatic in my Head' and 'The Cosmopolitans'. The first presents the insider- outsider conflict whereas the second is a critique regarding the importance and place of art in the modern times.

Conclusion:

North East literature encompasses diverse elements- margin, border, religious, socio-political issues. A number of global and international challenges are on. The mainland media often highlights that North East is far from the centre. This binary of centre and margin is cogently asserted by Udianna Goswami in her famous book "Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam" by saying 'For the Indian state, the people of North East seem to have remained at the either end of the spectrum stretching between the noble savage and the naked brute' This is because North East literature is not circulated satisfactorily. In order to make North East literature accessible nationally and internationally, more and more translation works should be done. Effective measures should be taken to stop Language Death. According to K. C. Baral, in order to overcome the challenges of intra- lingual translation in North East, the establishment of Translation Mission in India and establishment of Sahitya Academy Office is the need of the hour. Moreover international Publication houses should be encouraged to come forward to publish the literature from the North East so that people across the globe are acquainted with the rich variety and diversity of North East literature and culture and understand them in the fragrance of the entire Indian culture.

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