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Migration And Trauma In Northeast Indian English Literature

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Abstract:

Migration, whether forced, induced by conflict, or chosen for opportunity—has profoundly shaped the cultural and literary landscape of Northeast India. English-language writers from the region as well as migrant voices who have settled there portray the psychic ruptures, contested identities, and resilient adaptations that accompany dislocation. Drawing on postcolonial trauma theory, this article examines how selected novels, short stories, poetry, and creative nonfiction represent the pain and possibilities of migration. By analyzing works by Mitra Phukan, Anjum Hasan, Janice Pariat, Robin S. Ngangom, and non-indigenous commentators such as Sanjoy Hazarika, the paper argues that English-language literature from the Northeast functions as testimony, counter-narrative, and a space of healing.

Keywords: Northeast India, migration, trauma, English literature, identity, postcolonial.

Introduction:

The eight states of Northeast India—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, occupy a geopolitical corridor marked by porous borders and layered histories of movement. Partition, ethnic insurgencies, ecological disasters, and economic shifts have all spurred large-scale migration and displacement (Baruah, 2020). English-language and literature emerging from or about this region records not only geographic journeys but also the psychic migrations of people negotiating fractured identities, loss of a sense of belongingness, isolation, exile, etc.

This article explores how Northeast Indian English literature represents migration as a traumatic yet potentially transformative experience. Using trauma studies (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001) and migration theory (Alexander, 2012), it investigates narrative strategies through which authors render the pain of loss and the quest for belonging.

Historical Context or the background of Migration in the Northeast:

Colonial annexation in the 19th century altered demography by importing labor for tea plantations and administrative work (Misra, 2014). The 1947 Partition displaced thousands across Assam and Tripura as refugees fled East Pakistan. Later decades witnessed insurgencies in Nagaland and Manipur, triggering internal displacement and outmigration (Hazarika, 1994). Climate-related disasters, such as recurrent floods in Assam, continue to dislocate communities (Gohain, 2019). Migration therefore remains both a historical constant and a contemporary crisis.

The issues of migration as a result become the challenge for both the migrated and the inhibitors of Northeast. Alienation, loss of connection between communities based of language, culture, tradition also breads in this region.

Trauma Theory and Literary Testimony:

Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an event that resists full assimilation into consciousness, returning in fragmented memories and narratives. Dominick LaCapra (2001) distinguishes “acting out” from “working through,” a framework useful for reading texts where migration trauma is repeatedly re-lived or gradually integrated. English-language literature provides a medium for articulating these silenced or unspeakable experiences (Luckhurst, 2008).

As a whole it can be traced and linked with texts and theories which use narrative fragmentation, unnecessary pause in between, prolonged silence either, repetition etc.

Fictional Representations:

Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife* (2005):

Set against Assam’s insurgency of the 1990s, Phukan’s novel depicts Rukmini, who navigates political violence and personal loss. Though not a migrant in the literal sense, Rukmini experiences “internal exile” as conflict estranges her from home and self (Baruah, 2020). The narrative illustrates how trauma reshapes belonging, mirroring the silent suffering Caruth (1996) identifies.

Rukmini’s as a character goes in a process of self discovery through episodes. The sense of distance from her husband mingled with her inability to reproduce becomes her nightmare and she struggles with those issues gives her a new perspective towards life. As a woman she finds herself isolated and anxious. The trauma of the character is also in a sense can be examined to get a root to explore other forms of trauma and identity crisis among the character of literature written on Northeast and its inhibitors. She is like the microcosm amid macrocosm.

Anjum Hasan’s *Lunatic in My Head* (2007):

Hasan portrays Shillong’s multicultural milieu where students and workers arrive from across the region. Characters such as Sophie, a Nepali girl grappling with identity, embody migration’s double bind: the hope of cosmopolitan opportunity and the sting of exclusion (Deka, 2015). Hasan’s understated prose highlights micro-traumas of everyday alienation.

This novel identifies the inner turmoil’s of the characters and their hope for a new beginning in search of opportunity become secondary due to their psychological aspects like questions of existence in an alienated situation, loss of connection and belongingness.

Janice Pariat’s *Boats on Land* (2012):

Pariat fuses folklore with colonial and postcolonial histories of movement. Her stories follow Khasi, Jaintia, and Bengali characters across temporal and spatial borders, illustrating trauma’s spectral recurrence (Pariat, 2012). Memory functions as both wound and bridge, aligning with LaCapra’s (2001) notion of “working through.”

Poetry and Personal Voice:

Poets Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih often write of exile, both literal and metaphorical. Ngangom (2009) laments, “My homeland is a war zone,” reflecting the ache of forced mobility. Nongkynrih juxtaposes natural beauty with violence, capturing the dissonance of belonging to a land that continually displaces its people (Deori, 2018). Their English verse, while shaped by colonial language, becomes a tool of resistance and remembrance. Those works reflects the inside out of the peoples and their mental struggles and concerns.

Non-Indigenous and Diasporic Perspectives:

Not all migrant narratives come from indigenous voices. Sanjoy Hazarika's nonfiction *Rites of Passage* (1994) documents refugee flows and insurgent violence with journalistic precision. Bengali writers settled in Tripura and Assam, such as Anirban Choudhury (2017), chronicle the ambivalence of being simultaneously insider and outsider. These texts complicate binaries of victim and colonizer, showing that trauma crosses ethnic lines. Postcolonial struggles become double for both who have migrated and for the inlanders.

Narrative Strategies: Fragmentation and Memory:

A notable stylistic feature across these works is narrative fragmentation, disjointed timelines, multiple narrators, and magical realist interludes. Such forms mimic traumatic memory's nonlinearity (Luckhurst, 2008). For example, Pariat's shifting chronologies reflect how displacement disrupts conventional storytelling. Similarly, Hasan's intersecting character arcs emphasize migration's collective dimension.

Healing, Hybridity, and the Role of English

While trauma dominates these narratives, they also depict resilience. Characters forge hybrid identities, using memory, music, and cross-cultural relationships to reconstruct belonging (Baruah, 2020). English, though a colonial language, becomes a shared medium for dialogue across ethnicities, allowing the region to "speak back" to the Indian mainstream and the world (Gohain, 2019). English for this region becomes truly the link language which helps in cultural inter change, interpersonal communications breeds in harmonious living amid chaos and mental setbacks.

Conclusion:

Northeast Indian English literature serves as both testimony and therapeutic space for communities marked by migration and trauma. Through fragmented narratives, lyrical memory, and multilingual sensibilities, writers convey the dislocation and creativity born of movement. Future research might compare these English texts with indigenous-language works or examine contemporary diasporic writing by Northeasterners living abroad, expanding our understanding of how literature mediates trauma and migration.

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