

**FROM MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM: REDEFINING NORTHEAST INDIAN  
LITERATURE****Daisy Rani Doley<sup>1\*</sup>**<sup>1\*</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Namrup College, Dibrugarh, Assam.**\*Coresponding Author:** Daisy Rani Doley

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**Abstract:**

The northeast region of India has always been considered the most unexplored and unfamiliar part of the country. Despite being an integral part of India, the northeast has often been seen as the "other" and has remained on the periphery of mainstream society. This region is highly diverse, comprising eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, and Sikkim. However, the contributions of this region to mainstream literature have been historically overlooked. The voices emerging from the northeast not only represent the marginalized and often neglected region, but also embody dissent. Despite facing numerous challenges, writers from the northeast are carving out their own spaces in the literary world. Figures such as Mamang Dai and Tamsula Ao are becoming synonymous with the representation of their entire community and are offering fresh perspectives to the literary scene. Their poetry has opened new horizons of interpretation and understanding, breathing new life into the previously unrecognized domain of literature. These writers from India's northeast have played a crucial role in bringing recognition to the previously overlooked literature of the region. Through their works, Tamsula Ao and Mamang Dai explore and articulate themes of representation, identity, and power, showcasing voices and perspectives of dissent, criticism, and introspection.

**Key Words:** unheard, representation, dissent, identity, disinherited, anonymity, reclamation, self.**Introduction:**

Sanjay Hazarika, in his book "Writing on the Wall: Reflections on the North-East" (2008), describes the Northeast as "Asia in miniature." This region is home to a diverse array of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The literature from the Northeast is quite varied and relatively new. It is yet to be fully recognized. In this context, Easterine Kire, a prominent poet from the Northeast, has made the observation:

Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story shouldn't be a basic human, right? Where there is a denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. The denial...violates our humanity. I believe that every history has its space in History. (Kire, 2004) The quoted lines are from a speech by Easterine Kire, presented at the International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) conference in Tromsø, Norway. These lines form a solid foundation for the discussion in this essay as they emphasize the importance of providing a narrative

space for every community to share stories of their everyday lives (social, cultural, political) and their tribal way of life. Furthermore, they stress the necessity of literary expression and liberation in conveying a community's story. This assertion is especially important for writers from this region as the creative process involves navigating between oral and written traditions, local and global influences, requiring them to generate new and innovative ideas to preserve the community's narrative in written form.

Homi Bhabha's observation in this connection is also quite relatable. In his essay "The Right to Narrate," Bhabha talks about the process of cultural translation that takes root "by propagating and projecting what he calls 'the right to narrate' – the authority to tell stories, recount, or recast histories" (Bhabha 2014). In these lines, Bhabha emphasizes the fact of granting the narrative right to every writer, a fundamental right that has been deprived of many. He comments that some writers are hesitant to claim this narrative right and stresses the need to give "authority to those speech acts that are made under pressure, those disturbed and disrupted dialogues of humankind" (Bhabha 2014). This would be a great move for the emerging writers from the Northeast whose literature is yet to find a voice, acknowledgment, and recognition outside the geographical world of the Northeast.

The writers of the Northeast need to transform spoken stories into written literature and find a theoretical and systematic way of representing Indigenous literary works. The unheard voices from the region should become strong voices of dissent. In this context, the role of women poets in establishing a place in the world is significant. The previously unheard voices should be empowered to create an alternative space in the literary world. One such writer from Arunachal Pradesh, a land known as the rising sun, is Mamang Dai. Mamang Dai (1957-) is an emerging and strong voice of dissent, portraying the rich and ancient cultural tradition of her birthplace. She is one of the representative poets of the region, striving to establish the northeast as a place with its own identity rooted in its rich natural and cultural heritage. Her writings are deeply connected to her ethnic background and aim to establish a distinct identity for India's northeast by celebrating its natural beauty, customs, and traditions.

Dai's poetry is rich in enshrining the unique culture, tradition, and ethnicity of the region. In her poems such as "River Poems," "Midsummer-Survival Lyrics," "Small Towns and the River," "Floating Island," "Prayer Flags-2," "Gone," "Remembrance," and "No Dreams," she sings of river, forest, and mountain as living presences, dense with sacred memories. The major concerns in her verses are the search for identity and roots, and exploring the native culture. In her writings, we can sense the intricate relationship one shares with one's ancestral roots and its importance in establishing one's identity. Mamang Dai, the representative poet of the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, challenges the idea that human beings are superior to other forms of life. She supports the view of the Adi community that humans share a kinship with animals, birds, trees, and natural elements such as rain, clouds, and bats. In her poem "Birthplace" from River Poems, she expresses this connection.

We are the children of the rain  
Of the cloud woman, Brother to the stone and bat  
In our cradle of bamboo  
and vine  
In our longhouses we slept, and when morning came  
We were refreshed. (River Poems, lines 1-7)

The given lines express her deep admiration and glorification of nature, reflecting her profound love for it. The question of establishing one's identity is significant here because nature plays a crucial role in one's identification. Nature serves as a space where one can recognize and define their own identity.

In another poem by Dai, "An Obscure Place" (2006), she emphasizes the idea that one can trace their ancestral roots through nature and its resources, such as the spirits of rivers, trees, and mountains. The poem highlights the mesmerizing and mysterious landscape and the natural beauty of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai praises the scenic beauty of her motherland and takes pride in belonging to such a land. The poem depicts the contrast between history and traditional stories, mostly passed down orally, and the poet aims to give permanence to these oral stories by adding a written form. With a sense of alienation, she writes:

The history of our race begins with the place of stories  
We do not know if the language we speak  
Belong to a written past  
Nothing is certain  
There are mountains, oh!  
There are mountains  
We climbed every  
slope, we slept by the river  
But we do not speak of victory yet. (An Obscure Place lines 1-8)

The lines from the poem "An Obscure Place" refer to the mountains, reflecting the poet's connection to her roots in the hilly terrain of Arunachal Pradesh. In these lines, she expresses her desire to return to her ancestral roots and her pride in being a woman from the hills, which is evident in her works. Contemporary poets from the North East have diverse voices, representing both individual poetic expression and the stories of the tribal people of the region as a whole (Joshi). Literature serves as a means of asserting one's identity.

The nationalist discourse has had a profound impact on the literary world of the Northeast, leading to a sense of abandonment and a lack of fair representation. Poetry from this region often reflects the conflict and tension experienced by the writers as they strive to gain recognition in mainstream literature. According to Jayanta Mahapatra in the Foreword to the Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast (2015), the poets of the Northeast find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the plight of their people. Despite the Northeast being a region of diverse religions, cultures, and traditions, the poetry from the area frequently revolves around the conditions in their homelands, showcasing a deep connection to their roots and a strong sense of belonging. And this is the principal reason why their poetry is found to be bonding- even though it may arise from "very different regions" ...''(Sen viii). The search for the past is the central theme in most of the writings from this region. The search is a hiatus, gripping and painful, between past and present.

There is a continuous urge to revisit the past to establish a definite identity. Dai's poetry landscapes the past and the present with recurrent images embedded in nature. She is a living legend for safeguarding the aspirations of the people of her region. Dai who hails from the land where hills and rivers are termed to be deities, in her poem- "The Missing Link" says:

There are no records  
The river was the green  
Sand white vein of our lives,  
Linking new terrain in a lust  
for land...." (Lines 20-24)

Here she states how historical records have no mention of the fates of many natives in the trappings of modernity. The conscious or unconscious erasure or deletion of northeast narratives is the main reason for the anguish of the writers from this region. The poetry of the Northeast is more or less embedded in identity politics. This power differentiation can be qualified in postcolonial terms. The center-periphery debate can be categorized into the confines of center/margin, colonizer/colonized, and domination/exploitation. These new perspectives on Northeast literature help to deconstruct the

complex reality of the region and its people, enriching the possibilities of new horizons. The writings from this region express the experiences of entire generations of people who have been historically overlooked or misrepresented. They carry the responsibility of resurrecting the lost history, which has been largely distorted by others. Through their writings, they aim to represent the diverse nationalities to the world.

Various parts of Northeast India are known for an atmosphere of unrest, apprehension, identity crisis, and violence due to various insurgent groups. In the contemporary scenario, literary expressions from the region uniquely represent these situations in their works. There is a strong sense of resistance in the writings of Temsula Ao. She opposes the portrayal of the Northeast in terms of the “totalization of culture” (Bhabha) and the tradition of viewing the region through the Self/Other binary. In her poems, Ao uses language as a tool to write back to the empire and to deconstruct and demystify misconceptions about the tribal world of Northeast India. Her compelling poetry not only seeks to showcase the distinctiveness of tribal literature from the North East but also possesses an aesthetic universality. As Derrida suggests, “What cannot be said above all must not be silenced but written” (2016).

Temsula Ao, the representative poet of the Ao Naga community from the state of Nagaland in the Northeast, is one of the most critically acclaimed writers from this region. A professor by profession and a recipient of many prestigious awards, including the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013, Ao has made significant contributions to literature. She has authored two collections of short stories, *These Hills Called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), as well as an essay titled "Quest for the Ideal Heroine" by Henry James. Her poetry collections include *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), and *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). Belonging to the Ao Naga community, her works reflect issues concerning the cultures, traditions, practices, and beliefs of her tribe.

Ao's poetry often laments the loss of indigenous culture, traditions, beliefs, and history that have faced desolation over the years. In her writings, we can witness an attempt at "cultural revivalism." Her poetry strives to overcome the cultural shocks experienced by the Northeast by reviving and preserving the nuances of their culture. Ao aims to deconstruct and reverse the negative connotations of tribes viewed through a lens of contamination. Prof. K.C. Baral (2006) argues that “the word ‘tribe’ is a stereotype, a construct, a product of colonial anthropology and is often politically exploited in our country under the constitutional provision of protective discrimination” (p. 57). This perspective is evident in Ao’s *Songs from the Other Life*. The title itself suggests that these are songs from another life—a life that once was but no longer exists. In the epigraph (History) of this poetry collection, she clearly states that her objective in writing poetry is “to redraft history.”

"These Songs From the other life Long lay mute in the confines Of my restive mind ...They now resonate In words of new Discernment To augment the lore Of our ancient core” (p. 239).

In another poem, “Blood of Other Days,” Ao deals with the issue of “hybridization of culture” and how in this process of the mingling of cultures, the originality of culture seems to be lost.

#### **She writes:**

And that our songs and stories Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense. We listened in confusion To the

new stories and too soon Allowed our knowledge of other days to be trivialized into taboo.

We stifled our natural articulations Turned away from our ancestral gods And abandoned accustomed rituals

Beguiled by the promise of a new heaven.” (p.297)

Haunted by feelings of rootlessness and ignominy, the poets of this region proudly vindicate their identity as tribal. Temsula Ao is no exception. Although the culture of the Northeast has transformed to a great extent, its core or essence remains unchanged. She seems to conform to Bhabha’s idea of hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1991): “The effect of mimicry is camouflage... it is not a question of harmonizing.” In her poem “Night of the Full Moon,” Ao echoes Bhabha’s concept. Ao accepts that preserving cultures in their pristine and undiluted state is an impossibility. This idea is also depicted in her poem “Nowhere Boatman.

### Conclusion:

The contemporary writers of Northeast India represent a vibrant new voice in literature, adeptly adopting English as their medium of expression while simultaneously writing back to the empire. They enrich their works by integrating native words from their linguistic heritage, a practice akin to Rushdie’s concept of "chutnification," aimed at preserving the indigenous flavors within their poetry. Prominent figures like Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao infuse their poems with these native words, transforming oral traditions into written forms that honor their cultural legacies. These writers have transcended the Northeast from nameless anonymity, forging a literary landscape that defies the dismissive neo-colonial attitudes often encountered from mainland India. Their works serve as poignant dissent against such marginalization, aiming to present a nuanced and authentic portrayal of their homeland to the wider world. Through their writings, they challenge stereotypes and misconceptions, offering a fresh perspective that celebrates the unique identity and rich diversity of Northeast India. Despite the historical neglect and apathy towards Northeastern writings, these authors have succeeded in amplifying their voices and asserting the significance of their regional literature on the national and global stage. They have not only preserved and revitalized cultural narratives but also contributed significantly to the broader discourse of Indian literature. As such, these writers stand as pillars of cultural resilience, ensuring that the Northeast's rich heritage continues to thrive and resonate in contemporary literary spheres. Thus, in conclusion, we can say that writers like Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao encapsulate the impact and significance of Northeastern literature by reclaiming and promoting their cultural identities through their work.

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