

## Making of a Frontier Literature

K. B. Veio Pou

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh College,  
University of Delhi.

Email: veiopou@gmail.com

### Abstract

*The emergence of the writings in English from the Northeast of India has attracted a lot of attention. Although home to many diverse cultural and linguistic groups with their own rich oral traditions the region is often misunderstood to be a homogenous entity. Nevertheless, the term 'Northeast' seems to have taken roots in referring to anything for or from the region, though there may be some resistance to such blanket terms from few pockets, and thus also the identification of a body of literature called writings in English from the Northeast. But does a language that is introduced to them by the colonial masters faithfully speak of the land, the people and culture as in the native languages? Or is the newfound interest on its literature only heightened by the political attention thrown on it? Does it truly embody the sentiments of the folk history that the region treasures in or is it just commercial space for a few who are educated in English medium institutions? These are some questions that this paper proposes to explore in order to understand the writings from the Northeast.*

**Keywords:** Northeast India, writings in English, oral tradition, literature, linguistic groups.

### Introduction: Writings in English from India's Northeast

Though the term 'Northeast' is largely a construct to identify a distinct geographical area, it has stayed on to refer to anything related to or from the region. But the term is also a misnomer as it makes the people think that the Northeast is a homogeneous entity despite the ground reality saying a different thing: there are different cultural, linguistic and racial groups cohabiting the region. In fact, there is visible resistance on the use of a blanket term like 'Northeast writing in English' to all writers writing in the language since their writing does not always speak of region or its people. Yet, somehow, the body of literature from the region gets identified as one or a sub-genre or a regional literature by virtue of it being from a unique geographical location. Somehow, being linked to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land, about fourteen miles at its narrowest, called the 'chicken neck' or the Siliguri corridor, the Northeastern states<sup>1</sup> have become India's

‘periphery’, away from the ‘mainland’ where the real politicking is done. This paper will look into the recent yet strong wave of writings in English from the region, with special reference to Naga literature in English.

Too little understood by the rest of the country, this region has largely remained ‘imagined’. However, of late, anything from the Northeast of India seems to be gaining attention, thanks to the initiation of the much hyped Look East Policy in the early 1990s as India’s policy to engage with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) for which India launched attractive packages for economic development for the region and even called it the ‘gateway to Asia’. This interest paid on the region is also reflected on the kind of scramble to promote the Northeast while exploiting its natural and creative resources. In literature too several publishing houses have rushed to the region to usher its writers into the limelight. Yet, the writers from Northeast are often overlooked even in the world of Indian writing in English too. In an interesting observation, Prasanta Das, writing against Jeet Thayil’s omission of the well-known Shillong poets in his anthology *60 Indian Poets* (2008), asserts that “anthology making is a political act” and “Thayil’s exclusion of these poets is analogous to New Delhi’s neglect of the northeast” (2008:19). Though the poets of the Northeast, in general, and the Shillong poets, in particular, have made their mark since the 1980s their poetry has not been widely acknowledged beyond the region.

Now, the question may be asked, is it really the political indifference that has overshadowed the minds of other Indian writers too that they have overlooked the Shillong poets? For Prasanta Das argues that reason for the poetry of the Northeast to be sidelined is their overt political tone because while Indian English poetry continues to be dominated by “the poetics of the Anglo-American world” that is obsessed with “symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit” the Shillong based poets, spearheaded by Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, feel closely linked to “the political ones like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish and Yehuda Amichai who by choice or circumstances (or both) voice of the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people.” I think this opinion was not a standalone as Ngangom and Nongkynrih in their edited book of poetry called *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (2003) also says, “The writers from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but

perform master the art of witness” (p. ix).

In 2012, however, what was somehow overlooked in Jeet Thayil’s anthology was mended by the publication of Sudeep Sen’s edited *The HarperCollins book of English Poetry* of eighty five poets including several poets from the Northeast. But the problematic political relationship that many ethnic communities of the region have with the centre continues to affect the imagination of an inclusive India. Thus, in a way, literature from the region is categorized as different from the rest of the country in as much as any products of the society.

While there is the view that the writings from the Northeast are overtly political, the other significant distinctive mark is the reliance on the oral tradition. With a rich history of oral culture, the writers from the Northeast find their oral tradition a good source of inspiration, or as Mamang Dai puts it, “... for many of us the legends and stories are still a wellspring of thought and emotions that are restored in a peculiar blend of myth and memory unique to the region” (2005: 5). Temsula Ao would also rightly point out that there is “a subtle conceptual shift” in the writings from this part of the region because they borrow a lot of the “elements from the oral traditions” (2007: 107-8). To elaborate on these two themes, I shall take examples from some Naga writings.

### **Articulating politics through literature:**

Though the people group called the Nagas is spread across several states of Northeast, recognizable writings have emerged only from the state of Nagaland, a state with English as its official language like some other states of the region. With a number of sub-tribes with their own distinct languages it is not surprising to find the Nagas adopt a language which is not their own yet common, which again is a result of the years of English medium schools that has effectively taken roots in their society. And the contemporary writers, being schooled in reputed colleges and universities, it was expected of them to find their creativity expressed in English. It may be noteworthy here that English as a language was introduced to the Northeast only in the early part of nineteenth century following the colonial encounter with British India Empire’s eastward expansion. But it was the Christian missionaries who effectively implanted the language through their English medium schools/institutions established in many pockets of the Northeast, especially among the hill peoples. Soon print culture, using the Roman script, was introduced to usher in printed text books for schools and Christian literatures in local languages.

The prolonged struggle for an identity separate from India has been a dominant theme among Naga writers. Though their writings may not always make bold political statements, their stories give voice to a people caught in the political conflict. Many of the stories from Temsula Ao's collection of short stories, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) narrate experiences of individuals during the "turbulent years of bloodshed and tears" whose lives were interlaced by the discomforting forces of violence. Set in the early years of fervent Naga nationalism there are stories of the unexpected raids on Naga villagers by the Indian armed forces, the precocious young girl brutally raped by the soldiers in front of the church goers, the shadowy force of personal enmity that has invaded the idealistic nationhood struggle, and the old man reminiscing his underground days as a Naga army to his grandson. Her other short story collection *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) also include stories that tell of the hovering sense of uncertainty in the minds of the Naga people about their future.

Easterine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), while tracing the life and experiences of a retired old Naga soldier, gives us a glimpse of the romantic rise of Naga nationalism in the 1950s to its present day disappointment of factional war that has deeply wounded the society. Like history unfolding before us, the novel lay the past bare for us to behold and learn from whatever has happened. And using 'bitter wormwood', the traditional herb believed to keep spirits away and also heal wounds, as a metaphor the author suggests that we heal the wounds of the past by learning to 'forgive'. Violence and war only leaves an endless flow of bloodshed. Her other novel *Life on Hold* (2011) tells of the other side of suffering in the later day story of Naga nationalism. While the nationalist movement continues to attract young people into it, the anxieties persist for those who wait at home as so often the news that comes home is heart wrenching.

In poetry too, as in fiction, the protracted political dilemma gets articulated clearly, though there is also anguish over the latter day disappointment with it. With the deep attachment to the oral tradition and its lyric form, the poets successfully used their creativity of composing poems to rant against injustices done to their people, the ill-happenings in their homeland and the assault of their beloved land. Stories have been told so that it will not be forgotten; songs have been sung so that the message is carried onward. This poem by Monalisa Changkija (2007) reminisces the 'nightmare' that continues to haunt the psyche of the people;

Stop this nightmare, I pray

wherein my people, victims of  
geography, history and politics  
have become prized booty  
to be overpowered and possessed  
by those who will not listen. (“Stop This Nightmare”)

While the Naga poets use their poetry as a tool to critique the oppressor to the Naga people, they also understand that there is an equally menacing threat growing at home ground. Through their writings, they address those dangers that lurk from behind. Differences that have cropped up midway the struggle have become a major threat to achieve their dreams. Once, the enemy was only an outside force, now another enemy has been born from within too. The political uncertainty too given birth to a generation of disillusioned youth and they are becoming a thorn to the prospect of the society. In this situation of friends against friends and brothers against each other, there can be no end to bloodshed as articulated by Nini Lungalang (2003) in this poem;

I saw a young man gunned down  
As I shopped in the market place.  
Two thuds and then he fell,  
And thrashed a bit, on his face.  
That’s all. He sprawled in the staring sun.  
(They whirled away in a cloud of dust  
In a smart white van).  
His blood laid the dust  
In a scarlet little shower,  
Scarlet little flowers.  
In the staring sun, the little flowers  
Will burn and turn to rust. (“Dust”)

One can picturize the sudden action that took place in a public arena – “the market place”. The boldness of the perpetrators left the spectators static, giving them no chance to react but merely watch the collapse of the victim before them.

The world of the Nagas at present is a blend of the violent and the idyllic. Through their poems, the Naga poets reveal a close association with nature while at the same time talking of violence. This is exemplified by their use of natural images like hills/mountains, rainbow, forest, dust, flowers, etc. alongside the disturbing images of fire, bullets, blood,

death, etc. Yet, the poems do exhibit in them the powerful contrast of reality.

**From the oral to the written:**

The oral tradition of the Nagas has withstood the test of time. And even though the written culture that came with the American Baptist missionaries created a kind of detachment from, and negligence of, the oral tradition, all is not lost. Perhaps, what has been with them since the earliest of time could not be wiped away by the modernizing forces however swift and unrelenting it might have been. The oral tradition of the Nagas, like other oral cultures of many parts of the world, constitutes the whole of history, culture, beliefs and relation with nature. In other words, it encompasses the whole life-system of the people. Being of the oral tradition, therefore, the Nagas writers too heavily rely on the stories and songs that are passed on to them from generations before them. The storytelling tradition, therefore, has a deep influence on the narrative style and the use of metaphor on the modern Naga literature.

Being from a vibrant tradition of storytelling, the Naga writers like Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire relies a lot on oral tradition and culture for metaphors and people centric themes. Easterine Kire's first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), is an example of trans-creating culture. Based on the Khonoma village's resistance to the British expedition in the Naga Hills, the novel is a beautiful example of retaining cultural idioms to make it deeply rooted to the tradition of the people. Another novel by her, *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2006), brilliantly showcases the simple yet pristine life of the Nagas at a time when modernity was fast enveloping and transforming their reality. Despite the unsettling problem of insurgency in the background, the people do not cease to take pleasure in their usual customary life. And as the Naga society moved on negotiating with the changes initiated by western/modern education, the novel also draws our attention to the discomforting position when traditional norms are also questioned. This is also seen even in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for my Head* when she ropes in stories that celebrate the ordinary life of the people and their everyday activities.

Likewise, in poetry too, the poets have borrowed from the different myths, legends and stories that make up the composite culture of the Nagas. Temsula Ao has used her creativity and brilliantly infused a new re-telling of the myths and the legends that has been part and partial of the people's history in *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). By giving a fine poetic touch to these stories and songs of the Nagas she has brought oral tradition to the fore and incited new interest in the literary world. Being derived from

the oral, the poems serve as channels to understand the richness of the Naga culture. In the poem “The Old Story-Teller”, from *Songs from the Other Life*, we are introduced to the art of “story-telling” which for the poet is a “proud legacy” from her grandfather. The inheritance of telling stories is her “primary treasure” which she garnered from her grandfather and “other chroniclers”. Story-telling was like something that

...ran in the blood  
Because each telling vitalized  
My life force  
And each story reinforced  
My racial reminiscence.

These stories include those that tell of her people’s origin,

When we broke into beings  
From the six stones and  
How the first fathers founded  
Our ancient villages and  
Worshipped the forces of nature.

Here the poet being of the Ao Naga tribe is narrating the belief in the Ao-Naga myth of the emergence of their progenitors from the six stones at Lungterok (Ao 2000). She learned to tell stories of various subjects, like the tale of the brotherhood of tiger and man. The stories should not be forgotten, grandfather would say, because it

Would be catastrophic  
We would lose our history  
Territory, and most certainly  
Our intrinsic identity.

Being of the oral society, the poet is once again re-asserting the importance of remembering these stories as they contain information about the ‘roots’ of the people. But, to the disappointment of the aging poet, the “responsibility” of story-telling is refused to be shouldered by her own “grandsons”, who see them as “ancient gibberish/ From the dark ages, outmoded.” Sadly, what was passed down as “treasures” was not intelligible to the modernizing young generation, so consumed with the written tradition. This thought that runs through the minds of the poet also shows the vulnerability of the oral culture as opposed to the rapidly growing and influential modern culture. What was a rich inheritance to the poet was mere “ancient gibberish” to her grandsons. At such a

time, the poet is filled with

...a bestial craving  
To wrench the thieving guts  
Out of that Original Dog  
And consign all my stories  
To the script in his ancient entrails.

The story of the “Original Dog” is in reference to the old Naga myth which says that once the Naga fore-fathers had a written script. In order to preserve it, they wrote in some animal skin. But one day a dog ate them away. Since then, the Nagas had to memorize all things that concern their way of life. Perhaps, mulling over the prospect that the age-old tradition might lose its life-force in the fast changing world, the poet is compelled to wish that the “Original Dog” has not stolen the animal skin in order to avoid a possible ‘catastrophe’!

Easterine Kire’s poem *Genesis* from her first poetry book *Kelhoukevira* (1982) speaks of the pristine world of the Nagas before bloodshed and violence invaded their land:

Keviselie speaks of a time  
When her hills were untamed  
Her soil young and virgin  
And her warriors, worthy  
The earth had felt good  
And full and rich and kind to his touch.

The naturally fertile land of the Nagas is celebrated and the people had nothing to worry as they are bountifully blessed. Happiness is also signaled in the poem as they end their day with “songs” that “filled all the earth”. With the present embroiled in violence and a future uncertain, the poet cannot help but pine for the unspoiled past.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this short discourse shows that there are two distinguishing features in the making of the Northeast literature, as exemplified by the Naga writings. First, their writing is political in nature. Many factors contributed to this point; from the political and the administrative neglect of the region to the growing sense of instability because of various anti-social elements. Besides many things, the writers from this part of the country understand that writing comes with a sense of social responsibility and is, therefore, not



just an individual quest to explore creativity. Writing is a defiance at times and has to take political overtone. Secondly, there is the reliance on the oral tradition for various literary metaphors. And with a narrative style strongly hinged on the art of storytelling that is very rooted to their culture, a new literary theme is engendered by synthesizing the oral and the written. Temsula Ao would say that this is “a subtle conceptual shift” in the writings from this part of the region because they borrow a lot of the “elements from the oral traditions” (2007: 107-8). The emerging trend of going back to their cultural roots helps the creative writers find metaphors with which they speak of themselves. While it may be questionable whether the writings in English from the Northeast has evolved into a distinctive literary tradition or should it at all arrive at it, it may be said that there is a need to explore this frontier of the larger Indian English worlds.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Northeastern states comprises of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura shares only two percent of its boundary with India. The other ninety eight percent are international boundaries bordering China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and Nepal. Sikkim was added as the eighth state in 2003, but since it is not contiguous with the other seven states called the ‘seven sisters’ nor share a history of turmoil like the other states, it stands aloof.

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