

Constructing the Self through Narratives: Literature from North-east India

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Abstract: In recent years there has been a considerable growth in Northeast Indian writings which are reflections of self, identity constructions, issues on family and society the region was mute for a long time but not anymore with the emergence of determined and enthusiastic pens from the region, who have resorted to literature: fiction, historical and political, as one of the modes of articulation to voice themselves. The emerging authors with their individualistic narrative styles have articulated their unique cultural experiences, representing the ethos of the region, its legends, myths, stories, presenting the pictures of sense of betrayal, alienation and marginalised space and its conflicting history and moribund politics. Narratives of the Northeast are not merely forms of entertainment but a medium for commenting on contemporary social and political events, constructing the actual self, and providing an account of true-life situations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Narratives are forms of communication through language which are significant ways of representing lived and living experiences, exchanging information, expressing feelings and emotions, and also, crucially about conveying of who we are. All narratives are culture laden. Be it oral or written, they are expressions and representations of the cultural systems of people, of its world view, its orientations and norms: its attitudes and habits, its customs and objects, its institutions and its history. They have promoted preservation, propagated change, perpetuated analysis and records.

Narratives have an important function in sense-making: enabling the exploration of tangible and intangible meanings. Stories position the living present within the context of a biographical and historical past, helps us understand the past and also to make sense of future possibilities. They provide an

emotional scaffold, rooted in past experiences, for practical and interpretative capabilities. They allow individuals to understand their status in relation to others, and make moral judgements about how the character of individuals and also of institutions has continuously changed over time. 'Narratives of lived experience and folk stories with its myriad cultural experiences are also an admix of real life and art. Irrespective of how a narrative is formed, be it by an individual or a group of individuals, all narratives have an inbuilt element or universality at least for the domain for which they are intended and therefore circulation of a story is a must for its artistic survival and appreciation.'¹

II. NORTHEAST - A MARGINALISED FRONTIER

The Northeast region of India which constitutes the 'enchanted frontiers' is home to many ethnic groups and remains one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of India. The region embodies a rich tradition of oral, and in some cases written forms. The states of the region share a lot of similar and common features in their origin, stage of social movements and developments, food habits, ancient customs and are yet quite varied from each other. As such the term Northeast is an inappropriate label, pasting an identity over a geographical space remarkably different from mainland India. Ignorance and lack of empathy on the part of the mainstream people lead to the misconceptions and the people of this region are gazed at as outsiders. The blanket term "Northeast" itself, as a marginal space, highlights the difference with mainstream people. It is due to this fact Northeast remains trapped behind a veil of selective silence for the rest of the country and the outside

world. Not only in literature, the engagement of mainstream Indian private media- both print and broadcast with this region remains marginal. And often representation of this part remains trapped in stereotypes. This is India's 'area of darkness, an area of interest to the mainland peoples. This constructed identity and the imposed nomenclature of this region generate a site for encounter.'ⁱⁱ

The government approach towards the region during pre-colonial setting was fluid and flexible, the colonial and post colonial settings have been less so and the societal boundaries became more rigid, reframing gradually into ethno-political blocks. Ethnic self-consciousness and its consolidation and asserting along the lines of tribe, community or language groups have become increasingly manifest in the recent years in the entire region.

There have been reflections and resentments and voicing of discontent, alienation and marginalisation. While some ethnic groups have been fighting for the right to self-identification, others have been launching movements for separate identity, yet some others are pressing for constitutional safeguard of their respective interests. Some of these struggles have turned violent, leading to proliferation of armed insurgent groups. The societies in the region have seen much bloodshed and tensions in various facets of social life. Linear factual histories do not trace the ravages in all their socio-psychological dimensions. Many of the fictional works of the Northeast not only write about the struggles, but also their impact on domestic and cultural fronts. They make fine explorations of life in times of trouble with their felt experiences. The impact of violence and militancy are extensively dealt with by many of the writers.

III. WRITING THE SELF

After the introduction of print culture into the region during the colonial times, collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial ethnographic agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the 'bewildering 'culture of races that the British encountered here. Colonial ethnographers had explored the inaccessible terrains of human inhabits of various parts of the 'hills' of present North-east India. Their writings on lives of various smaller communities were 'official and acquired

authentic status as part of their project of ruling these people and the areas they lived in.' (Biswas Pp.53)

For years, others have written about the people of Northeast, giving their opinions and most of the time writing about the ethnography and physiology of the region through a marginalised kaleidoscope. There is a lack of knowledge about the ground realities of people's lives and of what is actually happening and have happened in many parts of Northeast. The states of Northeast, the homeland to number of hill tribes has been underrepresented, misrepresented at times and as such marginalised in mainstream Indian literature. Many things of the region have gone unrecorded, unnoticed and at times ignored.

However, in recent years there has been a considerable growth in Northeast Indian writings which are reflections of self, identity constructions, issues on family and society the region was mute for a long time but not anymore with the emergence of determined and enthusiastic pens from the region, who have resorted to literature: fiction, historical and political, as one of the modes of articulation to voice themselves. The emerging authors with their individualistic narrative styles have articulated their unique cultural experiences, representing the ethos of the region, its legends, myths, stories, presented the pictures of sense of betrayal, alienation and marginalised space and its conflicting history and moribund politics. Narratives of the Northeast are not merely forms of entertainment but a medium for commenting on contemporary social and political events, constructing the actual self, and an account of true life situations. They are local voices who write about themselves and their cultures thereby marking their works with a deep sense of authenticity, for planning their own futures, and for shaping their own identities.

The writers, who call this region their home, choose to narrate about themselves, and contribute to the need of such narratives in rewriting identity and redefining marginality of the region. Besides the ethnocentric imagination and the politics of identity and marginality, themes such as nationhood, migration, exile and gender also prominently figure in the writings from the Northeast. Though the numerous writers of the region belong to diverse spaces, cultures, traditions, and languages they bond with their undoubted intimacy with nature and their deep connection with their land.

In search of a voice of its own, the marginal frontier has resorted to many modes of articulation. Literature, as one mode of articulation and expression, recovers and reconstructs identities in the context of the Northeast. There is a distinct autobiographical note in the way the writers arrange their subject matters. The writers with their characteristic sensitivity fictionalise the joyous and the woeful, the wretched and the enigmatic, the tranquillity and violence that obliquely grip the lives of the people; upholding and inundating, embalming and traumatising the people of the region. The majestic illustrations on romance with nature, myths and folklore give the narratives of Northeast a distinctive flavour.

Many writers of the region have opted English as their means of narrative articulation which as a fact is a language through which they can reach out to the wider reader base. These poets and writers have effectively combined music, rhythm and patterns of their own languages and cultures with the forceful communicative power of the English language. The dynamics of social change and cultural contact underpin the writings of these writers, when they delve into the explorations of the myths and sagas; narrate the small histories of the people, both personal and political and describe how people's identity have been consolidated as the society gradually changes.

IV. RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

In the absence of any authentic history of most of the communities in the Northeast, the creative writers have taken on themselves to be the cultural historians of their communities. Their works provide us with resources for writing alternative histories with inclusion of stories about real people, real life situations, day to day struggles of people and issues that engage them; the stories of personal loss, of bereavement, of physical and emotional trauma.

Although individualistic in their narrative styles, the emerging writers also collectively represent what could be called the ethos of the region that underscores their shared history and political destiny. The land mass of the Northeast has existed for centuries through its legends, myths, stories, songs and dances, arts and crafts, and its conflicting history and moribund politics. This territory is ancient and modern, mythic and contemporary. Nature is the central trope, a life-giving force in the tribal epistemology that

underscores the correctness of the triad; the human, the nature and the divine.

The past is defined in terms of the present, mixing memory with myth and history in order to recover a particular ethnic identity. In the reprocessing of cultural memory, invocation to ancestors makes the land a place of longing and belonging. The writers, who call this territory their home, define their uniqueness and write about the diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices. Despite the contradictions and ambivalences, the creative force that energises contemporary writing primarily moves in writing identity and redefinition.

Across the genres, in the emerging literature from the Northeast, there is an appeal for bonding in the shared experience of pain and loss. The writings read a quest for Utopia – a peaceful place, where there can be the acknowledgement and identification of self, a home. Each writer is dealing with these issues in a very individual way, reacting, writing, and engaging with the problem from their own perspectives, and in the process providing us, the readers, with information and an openness that is unexpected and thought-provoking.ⁱⁱⁱ

V. CONCLUSION

The voices of the marginalised Northeast are absent from Indian (English) literature, which needs to be heard. According to one analyst, modern poetry in the region is found in the free verse of various regional languages and English and that much of the uniqueness of Northeast literature is the consequence of contemporary events, violence and identity. The writer from the Northeast, goes the argument, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way...living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness.^{iv} These voices, if given space in the education curriculum, will initially provide a recognition of the obscured conditions that exist in the sidelined frontier of the country, which is still less known. The exclusionary states of Northeast India as a field of struggle has gone into the social, scientific and philosophical formulations about the region.^v For a region marred by decades of violence, its literature is not just a social and historical map of events, but also a medium of telling its story to the world. In the yarn

of such a region, one often finds anger, fear and pain but also endurance, restraint and hope intricately woven. The poetry and prose of Northeast India are no different. Sanjoy Hazarika opines that though Northeast is reported to be extraordinarily rich and diverse region, in natural resources and beauty, in its people and their rich social and cultural inheritance, in the resonance of its complex politics and post-border ethnicities, the place remains tragic in the range of

violence it has suffered. As the history and civilization of this region had been pushed to the margins, the people of this region should take up to the task of recreating their past and reinventing their traditions to represent the present and hence resist the colonial project of them.^{vi}

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