

North-East Literature in English: An Overview

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Abstract

This North-East Indian literature in English has grown into a vibrant and significant field within contemporary Indian writing. Emerging from a region marked by geographical isolation, socio-political unrest, ethnic diversity, and rich cultural traditions, this body of literature articulates unique regional experiences while dialoguing with national and global discourses. This paper presents a comprehensive overview of the evolution, development, themes, literary forms, key writers, and contemporary relevance of North-East literature in English. By tracing its historical trajectories and examining the major thematic strands—identity, ethnicity, oral traditions, insurgency, gender, migration, and ecology—the study underscores the complexity and richness of this literary tradition. It also highlights the role of translation, academic recognition, critical reception, and the challenges faced by writers from the region. The conclusion emphasizes the growing significance of North-East literature and suggests future research directions.

Keywords

Identity, Oral Traditions, Insurgency, Indigeneity, Cultural Landscape

Introduction

The North-East region of India, consisting of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, represents one of the most culturally diverse and historically complex regions of the country. Home to hundreds of tribes, languages, and subcultures, the region stands apart in its socio-cultural composition, ecological diversity, and political history. Literature from the North-East has long existed through oral forms such as folktales, myths, ballads, and ritual songs. However, the emergence of English as a literary medium in the region marks a new phase in its cultural articulation. North-East literature in English has expanded significantly since the late twentieth century. Writers have used English both as a tool of creative expression and as a

medium for negotiating identity, representing political tensions, and challenging mainstream perceptions of the region. The literature articulates lived experiences shaped by insurgency, ethnic conflicts, migration, colonial histories, and the pressures of globalization. In addition, the natural landscape—rivers, mountains, forests, and ecological heritage—forms a recurring motif. In recent years, North-East literature has gained academic legitimacy and global recognition. University syllabi across India now include works by writers such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat, and Mitra Phukan. Awards such as the Sahitya Akademi Award and the JCB Prize shortlist have further enhanced visibility. This paper offers a detailed overview of the development and thematic richness of North-East literature in English.

Historical Background

a. Early Encounters and Colonial Influence

The British colonial administration played a formative role in shaping the literary landscape of the North-East. English education reached the region primarily through missionary activities, especially in Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Missionaries translated the Bible, compiled grammars and dictionaries of tribal languages, and introduced Western education. However, creative writing in English by native writers was limited in the early period. Colonial writings—travelogues, ethnographic records, and administrative reports—constructed the North-East as a remote frontier inhabited by “primitive tribes.” These representations influenced early modern perceptions of the region but failed to capture its cultural depth. Indigenous writers would later contest and rewrite these narratives.

b. Post-Independence Developments

After independence, the region witnessed significant political reorganization. States such as Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), and Mizoram (1987) were carved out of Assam. Ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, and demands for autonomy shaped social life. These upheavals began to influence artistic expression, including literature in English. English became a means to articulate concerns about identity, cultural preservation, and political marginalization. Newspapers, magazines, and university departments encouraged creative writing. Writers increasingly used English to reach broader audiences beyond linguistic boundaries.

c. Literary Growth from the 1980s Onward

The late 20th and early 21st centuries marked the consolidation of North-East English literature as a recognized category. Anthologies such as *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from the North-East* and *Dancing Earth* helped canonize the literature. National publishing houses began to promote writers from the region, and literary festivals provided platforms for emerging voices. This period witnessed the rise of oral literature studies, indigenous epistemologies, and postcolonial critiques that reshaped the understanding of North-East writing. Writers like Tamsula Ao, Robin S. Ngangom, and Mamang Dai laid the foundation for contemporary literary production.

Major Themes in North-East Literature

a. Identity, Ethnicity, and Belonging

One of the central concerns of North-East literature is the question of identity. The region's mosaic of tribes and communities constantly negotiates issues of belonging, cultural difference, and national integration. For instance, Tamsula Ao's stories explore Naga identity through everyday experiences shaped by tradition and modernity. Easterine Kire portrays the transformation of Naga society during times of conflict. Robin Ngangom writes of "being a writer from the conflict zone," capturing how identity is shaped by violence. Identity narratives often challenge mainstream Indian stereotypes that homogenize North-East communities. Writers assert cultural distinctiveness while exploring the complexities of regional and national belonging.

b. Oral Traditions and Indigenous Knowledge

The North-East has a rich heritage of myths, legends, folktales, festival songs, and ritual chants. Writers in English draw heavily from these oral traditions to express indigenous worldviews. Mamang Dai integrates myths of Arunachal Pradesh into her poems and novels, linking nature, spirituality, and memory. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih uses Khasi myths to comment on contemporary issues. Oral literature serves not only as cultural documentation but also as a mode of resistance against cultural erasure and modern fragmentation.

c. Conflict, Insurgency, and Trauma

Political unrest has shaped the lived reality of many North-East communities. Insurgency, counterinsurgency operations, human rights violations, and ethnic clashes have left deep scars. Literature provides space for representing these traumatic histories.

Examples include: Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*, which reflects political tensions in Meghalaya; Tamsila Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, depicting the violence of the Naga insurgency; Robin S. Ngangom's poetry, which blends personal and political grief. These works humanize the experiences of ordinary people caught in conflict and challenge simplistic media portrayals.

d. Migration, Displacement, and Diaspora

Internal migration due to conflict, economic aspirations, and globalization is a prominent theme. Many young individuals from the North-East migrate to metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Their experiences of discrimination, alienation, and cultural negotiation find expression in literature. Janice Pariat often writes about memory, nostalgia, and the emotional landscapes of displacement. Parismita Singh's graphic narratives address the complexities of borderland identities between Assam, Arunachal, and Bhutan.

e. Gender, Women's Voices, and Social Change

Women writers from the North-East have contributed richly to Indian English literature. Their works explore gender roles, patriarchy, empowerment, community expectations, and bodily autonomy. Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* critiques the marginalization of women within Naga society. Mitra Phukan examines women's experiences in Assamese society. Iralu, Dai, Pariat, and other women writers present nuanced representations of female resilience and agency.

f. Ecological Consciousness and Environmental Writing

The North-East is known for its biodiversity, sacred forests, rivers, and mountains. Writers portray the environment not merely as a backdrop but as a living entity with cultural and spiritual significance. Mamang Dai's works reflect ecological spirituality. Tamsila Ao's poems lament deforestation and the erosion of traditional ecological knowledge. Environmental degradation due to dams, mining, and industrial projects is a recurring concern, making North-East literature an important contribution to eco-criticism.

Literary Forms and Genres

a. Poetry

Poetry is perhaps the strongest form in North-East English literature. Poets such as Robin Ngangom, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai, and Temsula Ao explore themes of identity, memory, conflict, and nature.

b. Fiction

Contemporary fiction—from short stories to novels—often blends realism, folklore, and political commentary. Writers like Easterine Kire, Janice Pariat, Siddhartha Deb, Mitra Phukan, and Anjum Hasan have produced nationally recognized works.

c. Drama

English drama from the region is less developed but growing, with playwrights integrating folk performance traditions with modern stage techniques.

d. Graphic Novels and Digital Storytelling

Parismita Singh and younger artists have expanded the literary landscape through graphic fiction, illustrating borderland narratives. Digital platforms, blogs, and online literary collectives further diversify the region's creative expressions.

Major Writers and Their Contributions

a. Temsula Ao (Nagaland)

Temsula Ao's works are foundational to North-East literature. Her stories in *These Hills Called Home* depict the brutality of insurgency and its effects on Naga communities. Her poetry integrates oral traditions, nature, and memory.

b. Easterine Kire (Nagaland)

Easterine Kire is known for novels such as *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *When the River Sleeps*, and *Mari*. Her narratives explore the transformation of Naga society, the power of folklore, and the resilience of women.

c. Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh)

With works like *The Legends of Pensam*, *The Black Hill*, and *The River Poems*, Dai blends myth and history. Her writings highlight indigenous worldviews, ecological ethics, and cultural continuity.

d. Janice Pariat (Meghalaya)

Pariat's Boats on Land and Seahorse showcase lyrical prose and complex emotional landscapes. Her stories weave memory, folklore, desire, and the challenges of modernity.

e. Anjum Hasan (Meghalaya)

Anjum Hasan's novels such as *Lunatic in My Head* and *Neti, Neti* explore urban alienation, identity dilemmas, and the shifting cultural landscape of Shillong.

f. Robin S. Ngangom (Manipur)

A major poetic voice, Ngangom writes about conflict, identity, and personal loss. His poems reveal a deep engagement with the political turmoil of Manipur.

g. Mitra Phukan (Assam)

Phukan's fiction focuses on Assamese society, classical music, and the long-lasting impact of political unrest.

h. Emerging Writers

Younger authors such as Kaushik Barua, Avinuo Kire, and Ankush Saikia continue to diversify North-East literary expression through crime fiction, bildungsroman, and historical fiction.

Role of Translation in Expanding the Canon

Translation is crucial for bringing literature from Bodo, Khasi, Mizo, Manipuri, Assamese, and other languages into English. Translations allow linguistic minorities to reach national and global readers.

Examples include:

- Translations of Assamese writers like Arupa Patangia Kalita,
- Manipuri literature translated by scholars like Thongam Aruna,
- Mizo and Bodo oral literature translated by contemporary researchers.

Translation helps preserve oral cultures, democratize knowledge, and challenge the dominance of mainstream languages.

Representation of Violence, Memory, and Trauma

North-East literature often engages with the psychological effects of prolonged violence. Narratives depict fear, loss, mourning, and survival. These works serve as testimonies, recording histories often ignored in national discourses. They also create space for collective healing by acknowledging trauma and resilience.

Critical Reception and Academic Recognition

Over the past two decades:

- Universities have introduced courses on North-East literature.
- National awards have brought visibility to writers.
- Scholarly work on postcoloniality, indigeneity, border studies, and eco-criticism has expanded.

Writings from the North-East challenge the mainland-centric representation of India and broaden the scope of Indian English literature.

Challenges Faced by North-East Writers

Despite growth, writers face numerous obstacles:

- Limited regional publishing infrastructure
- Inadequate archiving of oral traditions
- Underrepresentation in national media
- Stereotyping of the region
- Linguistic barriers
- Economic constraints for young writers

Overcoming these challenges is essential for sustaining literary production.

Future Directions

North-East literature is likely to expand in:

- Eco-critical narratives focused on climate change
- Speculative fiction inspired by tribal myths
- Women-centric narratives and feminist theory
- Graphic novels and digital storytelling
- Borderland and transnational literature
- Academic research on oral traditions and indigenous epistemologies

The growing global interest ensures that North-East literature will continue to enrich contemporary literary studies.

Conclusion

North-East literature in English has emerged as a dynamic and influential body of writing that bridges tradition and modernity, oral cultures and digital platforms, regional concerns and global discourses. It offers powerful insights into identity, conflict, memory, ecology, and cultural resilience. As more writers gain national and international recognition, the literature of the North-East will continue to redefine the Indian literary canon and contribute meaningfully to world literature.

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