SITUATING MARGINALIZATION IN NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE, MALSAWMI JACOB AND ROBIN S. NGANGOM

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this thesis entitled "Situating Marginalization in Northeast India through Select Works of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom" written by Immanuel Lalramenkima for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies has been written under my supervision.

He has fulfilled all the required norms laid down under Ph.D. UGC Regulations 2019 of Mizoram University. The thesis incorporates the student's bona fide research and no part of it has been submitted for award of any degree in this or any other University or Institute of Learning.

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DECLARATION

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July 2024

I Immanuel Lalramenkima, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The North-east of India is a landlocked region comprising of eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. Its land-based access to the rest of India is through what is popularly known as the 'chicken neck' or 'Siliguri corridor' that runs from an east to west direction, sandwiched by Bhutan on the north and Bangladesh on the south. It is physically located at a region which can be described as being remote and distant from New Delhi, the capital of India. The region's borders are with countries like China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal making approximately ninety-eight percent of its total borders international. The remaining two percent is with mainland India through the aforementioned 'Siliguri' corridor. This apparently delicate physical link the Indian state shares with the North-east of India is made even more conspicuous because of the demographic composition of the region. The presence of the Mongoloid racial other in the North-east more often than not results in modes of conflicting encounters between the Indian state and the region, predominantly the hill states. Historically speaking, the impending departure of the British from India was witness to many of the people groups and communities of the North-east seeing it as an opportunity to fulfill their aspirations of leading an independent existence outside the control of the Indian state. Following independence, the North-eastern region pressed for political and economic self-governance and a genuine federal distribution of authority. However, certain post-independence developments laid the groundwork for confrontation between the North-east and the Indian state which adopted a highly centralist approach driven by security concerns and a monocultural integrationist narrative. Nani Gopal Mahanta asserts that the "…crux of the argument is that the modern-nation state allows recognition of a single nation only…" (305) and as such is inherently problematic. The distinct nationalism and culture of the North-easterners posed a direct challenge to the Indian state's uniform approach to the region. Udayon Misra highlights that the Indian state in its attempt to homogenize the North-east without due considerations of the ground realities of the region faced resistance from even the Assamese.

> The idea of a uni-cultural nation with one dominant language, held together by a strong State which drew its strength from the diverse

> strands of the rich and varied Indian civilization, was challenged by the Nagas and the Mizos and finally, even by the Assamese. (Misra, *The Periphery* 11)

Udayon Misra's mention of even Assam being included in movements for independence expresses an element of subtle surprise on his part. While Misra appears to find greater justification in the Naga's and Mizo's resistance to the Indian state, the Assamese who have historically had a much stronger socio-economic and cultural link to mainland India perhaps appears to be an anomaly. However, such an act of surprise needs a re-look because ultimately there are sentiments that even certain sections of the Assamese population share with the rest of the North-east which is partly based on a racial and cultural difference from the rest of mainland India.

> Mongoloid phenotypes, such as epicanthic fold, high cheekbones and yellowish skin tones have not found a place in the common imaginaries of the "Indian Face". Instead, Northeasterners are nonrecognized and misrecognized, mirrored back by the wider Indian society as foreigners…. (Wouters and Subba 127)

Subsequently, the account of the Manipuris finds a similarity with the Assamese context, especially among the Meiteis who have had historical socio-economic and cultural ties with other parts of mainland India. However, the Meiteis too depict strong indigenous racial links with their Mongoloid heritage that generates an identity consciousness different and distinct from the mainstream Indian society.

> Affinity and Identity. These, more than any other factors, represented the principal compulsions that triggered the Naga, Mizo, Meitei, Tripuri and Assamese affirmation of separateness from the non-Mongolian communities that dominate the Indian subcontinent. (Hazarika 159)

To quote Misra once again on how the Northeast's racial attributes acts as a cultural barrier to cast the North-easterner outside the definitions of 'Indianness'.

> One may recall that some years ago when the name of a prominent tribal politician came up for an important national post, a front-ranking national daily commented that the said person was not fit for the post because his Mongolian features were unacceptable to the 'Indian peasant'! (Misra, *India's North-East* 5)

The Mongoloid racial characteristics associated with the people groups of the North-east are categorically cast outside the imaginary of the average Indian who by the difference and distinctiveness in physical appearance, without a second thought, assigns the attributes of an outsider to the North-easterner. The average mainland Indian's racial prejudices evolve from the idea of Indianness that establishes and questions who belongs or does not belong to India. The Mongoloid North-easterner's genealogical or ancestral link does not find its origins within a cultural or shared past with the rest of mainland India and as such makes conditions rife for effortlessly casting the people groups of the region as outsiders. Martin Bulmer defines racial identity as

> [A] collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. (36)

This kind of racial prejudice against the North-east has led to not just an otherization and alienation but, in some respects, a clash of cultural identities, which persists to this day despite the broader acceptance of alternative nationalisms within the Indian state. Moreover, this monolithic perspective of the average mainland Indian often manifests in certain racial and cultural stereotypes, as highlighted above, of North-eastern inhabitants which significantly contributes to the exclusion and marginalization of the region from the rest of mainland India. The North-east subject's condition may be defined by an externally imposed perpective "…to remain permanently outside of the sphere of national imagination but inside the state's territory" (Wimmer 339). In attempting to situate marginalization in the North-east of India through select literary works of Easterine Kire an author from Nagaland, Malsawmi Jacob a Mizo author and poet and Robin S. Ngangom a Manipuri Meitei poet there is a need to understand what the term marginalization, margin or marginality entails. The study of marginality in the North-east can be taken up at various levels but the primary focus of the present research initiative remains focused on the Indian state's dialectical relationship of self and the other with the region. In other words, the Indian state, nation, center or mainstream India of which the North-east is situated, located or positioned as being marginalized. And within the North-east, the home

states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur of the three selected writers assume greater prominence in situating and positioning of marginalization of the North-east for the present study. However, prior to a deliberation on the concept of marginalization, margin or marginality, one must also be cognizant about the reality of the need to accommodate the multiple layers of complexities embedded in the study of a region like the North-east. One of those outstanding layers that is often rendered ambiguous, irrelevant and inconsequential by the Indian state's paramount interests of constructing a North-east that falls in line with the center's essentialized priorities, is the differences and distinctiveness which form an integral part of the North-east's lived reality. This legitimate need for the North-east to express its subjectivity on its own terms, as a part of its indigenous cultural and spatial heritage, without the condescending demeanor of we know all about the North-east fueled by stereotypes and presuppositions about the region, needs some critical revision. Moreover, the urgency of the need to focus on the reality of the conditions that govern the region is rendered even more crucial today because the homegrown part of the epistemology on the North-east has been habitually dismissed for many decades now, as a foregone conclusion, as biased misrepresentations about the region dominate perceptions that are often projected by academia from without:

> [C]urrent scholarship on Northeast India which, although rich and growing, gets caught in the trap of an assumed stereotypical representation of the people and place: in violence, exceptionality and security…but it seems the narrative is stuck on this negative representation. (Saikia and Baishya 5)

While the North-east as a whole presents fairly similar conditions, there are variations from region to region, especially the hill areas at the eastern most borders of the Indian state with present-day Myanmar – the three states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. The three states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur occupy a position of prime importance in the present study as the people groups inhabiting the aforementioned contiguous states have closer and overlapping ethnic and linguistic ties with each other primarily influenced by the geographical layout of the region. The location of the three states at the eastern most periphery of the Indian state often poses challenges as Naga, Mizos and Meiteis have ethnic ties spilling over across the international border in adjacent regions of Myanmar.

> The distinctive shawls of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, each colourful strand proclaiming a tribe, a lifestyle and an identity, share a commonality with communities across the borders in Myanmar and Thailand. (Hazarika 161)

The conditions become more complex as the ethnic ties of the Nagas connect the contiguous Naga areas in the northern hills of Manipur leading to the political demand for the unification of Naga occupied regions. This demand popularly referred to as a move for greater Nagaland also includes parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and even Naga occupied areas of Myanmar. The other irredentist movement, is one of the Zo reunification of the Kuki-Zo-Chin ethnic groups that attempts to drive the aspirations of uniting all Zo inhabited contiguous areas of the southern hills of Manipur with Mizoram generates another politically complex scenario. This demand for Zo unification also spills over into parts of Tripura, Assam, Bangladesh and Myanmar to create a unified single contiguous land with Mizoram at its center.

> The oral history of the tribes of Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and other areas tell of ancestors from the shadowy past, from mountains steeped in mist and romance…epic battles and great warriors. (Hazarika 160)

Nagaland is a state of India located in the hills and mountains of North-east India. It borders the state of Assam towards the west, the state of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam to the north, Myanmar to the east and Manipur towards the south. The capital of the state is Kohima and lies towards the south of the state of Nagaland. Demographically the population of the state comprises of various Naga tribes of more than designated twenty tribes. Though many cultural traits are shared between the Naga people, apparently, the tribes have maintained quite a high level of isolation and sometimes it is hard to identify them as a single people. The Konyaks have been designated as being the largest Naga tribe. They are followed by the Aos, Tangkhuls, Semas, and Angamis. Among the remaining Naga tribes, the following may be listed: Lothas, Sangtams, Phoms, Changs, Khiemnungams, Yimchungres, Zeliangs, Chakhesangs and Rengmas. There are around sixty spoken dialects of the Naga language which belong to the Sino-Tibetan group of languages, as such the Nagas lack a common language to unite them. Dialects of the spoken Naga languages may even differ from village to village and for inter-tribe communication they rely on a broken form of the Assamese language – Nagamese. However, many Nagas speak in English

and English is the official language of the state. The indigenous faith of the Naga people is rooted in animism, acknowledging the presence of a supreme creator and the concept of an afterlife. They perceive nature as imbued with vitality, inhabited by unseen energies, lesser gods, and spiritual entities, whom priests and healers communicate with. During the nineteenth century under British colonization, Christianity, particularly through Baptist missionaries, was introduced to the region, significantly influencing the religious landscape. Impacting the Naga people to such an extent that today, more than two-thirds of the entire population of Nagaland is Christian compelling a significant majority of Nagas to depart from the practice of animistic faith. Due to the stark differences of the Nagas from the other parts of India the British introduced the inner line regulations to the Naga Hills in 1873. In the lead-up to India's impending independence in 1947, the inhabitants of Nagaland were contemplating their own path to self-governance. The Naga Hills District had been designated as Naga Hills excluded areas by the British in 1935, effectively removing them from direct British India administration. This decision was influenced in part by the advocacy of the Naga Club, an alliance of forty-two tribes united to safeguard their cultural identities. By the mid-1940s, the Naga Club evolved into the Naga National Council (NNC), a political entity led by Imti Aliba Ao as its secretary. Initially, their demands centered on local autonomy and a distinct electoral system within an autonomous Assam. Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of India, expressed skepticism, regarding the Naga territory as insufficiently large to function independently. Consequently their aspirations swiftly shifted towards asserting the Nagas' right to self-determination based on their unique ethnic, social, and religious characteristics. In May 1947, the NNC presented another memorandum to the British authorities, requesting the establishment of an interim government for the Naga people in the Naga Hills region for a period of ten years. Subsequently, in June, a nine-point agreement was reached between the NNC and Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam representing the Indian state, largely aligning with the NNC's proposals. However, discrepancies emerged regarding the interpretation of the final point, which pertained to a review of the situation after ten years. Naga leaders understood it to imply the option of secession from India after the specified period, whereas the Indian government maintained that any deliberations would remain within the framework of the Indian Union. Following India's independence in 1947, the Naga region initially

remained integrated with Assam. Nonetheless, a robust nationalist movement emerged, advocating for the political unity of Naga tribes, with some sections even demanding complete secession from the Indian Union. This movement precipitated numerous violent incidents, prompting the deployment of the Indian army in 1955 to restore order leading to the declaration of Nagaland as a disturbed area. Subsequently, in 1957, following negotiations between Naga leaders and the Indian state, the Naga Hills area of Assam and the Tuensang frontier division to the northeast were amalgamated into a single administrative unit under direct Indian state control. Despite this agreement, unrest persisted, characterized by non-cooperation with the Indian state and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 was imposed upon the Nagas leading to tragic violence and large scale human rights violations by the Indian army. A subsequent accord, reached during the Naga People's Convention in July 1960, resolved to establish Nagaland as a constituent state within the Indian Union. Nagaland was assigned statehood in 1963, and a democratically elected government assumed power in 1964. However, rebel activities persisted, increasingly manifesting as extortions and often motivated by animosities and personal vendettas rather than purely political objectives. Despite ceasefires and negotiation attempts, the violence and rebellion persisted, leading to the imposition of direct Presidential Rule on the state in March 1975. Although underground leaders agreed in November 1975 to disarm and accept the Indian constitution, a faction of hardcore Naga nationalists persisted in advocating for Naga independence. Established in 1980, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), a renowned Naga nationalist organization advocating separatism, experienced internal strife leading to its division into two factions in 1988 due to disagreements among its members. The predominant faction has been engaged in negotiations with the Indian state, resulting in a ceasefire agreement in 1997. Regrettably, this accord has proven only somewhat effectual, with violent episodes persisting well into the early twenty-first century. Additionally, conflicts between the factions have escalated as each faction endeavors to assert territorial control over the region.

Easterine Kire is a Naga writer born in the year 1959 and hails from the city of Kohima from the state of Nagaland, India and is the fourth child amongst seven siblings. As both her parents were working parents she spent a significant portion of her childhood with her maternal grandparents in Kohima. Kire's maternal

grandparents owned a large estate where there was an orchard and vegetable garden where she spent most of her time experiencing the fruits and beauty of nature. On the other hand, her paternal grandfather was one of the first doctors among the Nagas. During her years of growing up the importance of education was emphasized heavily by the elders of the Naga community. As such, Kire was educated at the Kohima Baptist School after which she attended college at the Kohima college for graduate studies and then completed her Masters at NEHU, Shillong in the year 1981. She further completed her Ph.D. under Pune University in the year 2002. Prior to establishing herself as a renowned poet and author Kire first began to work as an editor for the Department of Publicity, Government of Nagaland in Kohima in the year 1982. After which, from the year 1985 to 1988, she began to teach English literature at the Kohima college in Nagaland. Kire then moved up to Nagaland University, Kohima where she was a lecturer and reader in English for a period of seventeen years from 1988 to 2005. Currently, she is the founder member, publisher of Barkweaver Publications since the year 2014.

Kire's creative efforts towards writing novels was inspired by African authors who stressed upon their native culture and society. When writing biographical novels and historical fictions she lays great emphasis on the need to take a research intensive approach to ensure factual correctness of all corresponding details. She goes on to state that "…without working very hard on getting the historical details correct, historical fiction should not be attempted" (Daftuar, "For Easterine"). If one is to write about lived realities it requires an enormous amount of hard work of which an accurate research-based presentation of historical reality is absolutely essential. She further emphasizes on the presence of a great amount of "unwritten history" (Daftuar, "For Easterine") – stories that the larger Naga populace has not been made privy to but is crucial towards developing an understanding of historical events linked to one's own land. The process of collecting information requires interviewing elders and gathering stories to access knowledge which rests primarily upon lived experiences of the past generations. Kire admits that when she writes stories about Nagaland the "story-telling tradition" (Daftuar, "For Easterine") which forms an integral part of her being informs and colours her imagination and engagement with the immediate world around her. In fact, she emphasizes that this story-telling tradition finds a place at the very core of her being as a novelist on Nagaland. When she writes Kire reveals that she primarily

authors literary works for the Naga people as the imagery, backgrounds and culture would be recognized by them with relative ease – to create what she refers to as "our own literature" (Daftuar, "For Easterine"). But she also writes for an international readership that is inquisitive and interested in the Naga way of life – by way of edification.

Kire is recognized for having published the first book of English poetry *Khelhoukevira* (1982) by a Naga and she is also credited for having published the first English novel *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) by a writer of Naga origin. Among her many other works of poetry *The Windhover Collection* (2002); *Freedom Rainbow* (2009); and *Jazzpoetry and other poems* (2012) find prominent mention here. The list of other novels and other prose works runs quite long; some of the more prominent works are: *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007); *Naga Folktales Retold* (2009); *Mari* (2010), *Bitter wormwood* (2011); *Forest song* (2011); *Life on Hold* (2011); *When the River Sleeps* (2014); *The Dancing Village* (2015); *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016); *Walking the Roadless Road* (2019). Easterine Kire has also published a number of articles: "Chinese (Chinese Poetry Criticism)", Nagaland Observer, 1987; "Niepie Penuo, a Transcreation of an Angami Folk Poem", NEW Frontiers, January, 1999; "Naga Culture" AVUI Magazine, UNESCOCAT, Cultures of the World Dossiers, 2002; "Writers in Minority languages", Nordlys, Norwegian newspaper in Tromsø, August 2004; "The Naga Conflict Through a Poet's Eyes", Skarven Magazine, Tromsø, 2004; "Deconstructing the Naga Conflict", Nagaland Post, February 2005; "Ngugi and Rao: Narratives of Resistance", Perspectives in Indian writing, New Delhi, 2004; "Edges, oral Literature of the Tenyimia", Bøygen, University of Oslo, August, 2006; "Healing – North Norwegian Healers, Sami Healers and Angami Healers – Shared Methods?" Asiaguiden November 2008; "Burma – the Silent Scream" Grus magasin Tromsø, October 2008; "A Terrible Beauty is Born: Postcolonial poetry of Africa and Northeast India", L'espill magazine, Spring 2010; "The Narratives Silenced by War", Seven Sisters Post, 2011; "Cultural Theft", Seven Sisters Post, 2012; "Home-homelessness", Welt -Sichten, July 2012; "Lhusaku", Morung, October 2015; "Easing the Northeast into India", The Hindu Newspaper, November 2015; "I got you a Christmas Tree", Morung, December 2015; "The Land of the Ahngs", Morung, February 2016; "A Row of Beans", Morung, May 2016; "Home", The Hindu Group of Newspapers, July 2016; "So Was it Merry Good Governance Everyone?", Morung, December 2016; "Will the

Real Nagaland Please Stand Up?", January 2017; "How to Kill a Mountain", Morung, February 2017; "Food as Politics", Morung Express, April 2017; "Tribal Dictionaries", Morung, May 2017; "The Last-minute people", Morung, June 2017; and "The Church that God Built", Morung, June 2017.

Kire has also been recognized for her accomplishments in the field of literary arts and has been given awards as follows: Governor's Award for excellence in Naga literature 2011; Catalan PEN International Free Voice Award 2013; Lit for Life: The Hindu Prize for 2015 for the book 'When the River Sleeps'; Winner of Tata Literature Live! Book of the Year Award for fiction, for the book 'Son of the Thundercloud' 2017; Winner of Best English Language Book for 2018, awarded by Sahitya Sabha, Indian Academy of Letters, for the book 'Son of the Thundercloud'; and FICCI Book of the Year 2023 (fiction) for the book 'Spirit Nights'.

Mizoram is a state of India located geographically at the southern-most tip of North-east India. It borders the state of Assam towards the north, the state of Manipur towards the north east and Tripura towards the north west. Myanmar is located to the east and south while it borders Bangladesh towards the west. The capital of Mizoram is Aizawl and is located in the northern part of the state. The different tribes that make up the Mizos, which is a combination of two Mizo words '*Mi* is man and '*Zo* is Hill' – meaning 'Highlanders', are namely the Lushai, Chin, Kuki, Hmar, Pawi, Lakher and others. The Mizos unlike the Nagas have a predominantly common spoken language, the Mizo language, which is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by a significant majority of the people. The Mizo and English languages are official languages of the state. The Mizo language did not a have written script that survives the day and had historically been an oral community prior to Christianity making its way into the hills of Mizoram. Christian missionaries began to preach and work amongst the Mizos in the late nineteenth century which had led to provision of the modified Roman script as alphabets for the Mizo language. The impact and influence of the Christian missionaries initiated the process of Christianization of the entire Mizo populace which makes up approximately ninety percent of the population of Mizoram. The early history of Mizoram remains largely obscure. However, what is known is that between 1750 and 1850, the Mizo people (formerly known as Lushai) migrated from the nearby Chin Hills presently located in Myanmar and there are even accounts of genealogical links to present day China prior to their settlement in the Chin Hills. They had

established an autocratic political structure centred around hereditary chieftainships. Mizoram's tribes remained untouched by external political forces until the British annexed Assam in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabo. Subsequently, British incursions into Mizo territory in and around present-day plains of Silchar led to pacification expeditions by the British in the following decades. One such outstanding account is that of a British girl Mary Winchester's kidnapping by the Mizos from a tea plantation in the foothills of modern-day Mizoram followed by rescue operations pursued by the British thereafter. The pacification expeditions by the British proved to be fundamental in establishing administrative control over the entire Lushai (Mizo) Hills – a pacification and Christianization of the hostile Mizo tribes. By the 1870s, British authority extended over the region the implementation of the inner line regulations in 1873, restricting movement from the plains to the Mizo hills. It was a protective law that would help in preserving the distinct socio-cultural and political identity of the Mizo people in the future. However, formal annexation did not occur until the early 1890s. Through the Government of India Act 1935, the Lushai (Mizo) Hills district was designated an excluded area, removing jurisdiction of Assam's provincial legislature and placing administrative control directly under the governor of Assam. Following India's independence from British rule in 1947, Mizos nurtured aspirations of independence from the Indian state which was promptly denied and the Mizo Hills reluctantly continued to be a part of India. The Mizos prior to the years leading to India's independence from British rule had become very self-aware of their identity as a distinct people. It clearly dawned upon the Mizos that they were different and distinct in many aspects from the mainland Indians and their very existence as a people was threatened without a separate nation. To further deteriorate the fragile state of affairs, in 1959, the Mizo Hills endured the devastating and cyclical *mautam* famine, a calamity that recurred roughly every half-century. This famine was triggered by an infestation of rats coinciding with the flowering of specific bamboo species. Tensions flared between Assam's Chief Minister, Chaliha, and officials from the Mizo Hills over the allocation of relief efforts, exacerbating the existing distrust and discord between the Mizos and the Indian state. Frustrated by the perceived lack of assistance, Laldenga, a clerk within the district council, established the Mizo National Famine Front in 1960 to coordinate relief endeavours. The success of the relief efforts allowed Laldenga to gain popularity among the Mizo people allowing him to convert the

famine front into a political unit, the Mizo National Front (MNF). The growing discontent among the Mizo population led to the MNF declaring independence in 1966, sparking an armed resistance. On the night of 28th February 1966, MNF's armed wing the Mizo National Army (MNA) launched a bid for Mizo independence through Operation Jericho. They launched assaults on army posts and government buildings, seizing control of communications and the district, and proclaimed Mizoram as an independent country. On March 2nd 1966, the Indian government classified the district as a disturbed area under AFSPA 1958 and deployed the army leading to violence, killings and human rights violations on a massive scale. On March 5th and 6th, the Indian Air Force conducted aerial bombardments on Aizawl and destroyed its largest market. This marked the first instance of the Indian government employing airstrikes against its own citizens. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Assam Chief Minister Chaliha both refuted the bombing, instead claiming that the air force had been used for deploying personnel and delivering supplies. On 30th December 1971, the Indian parliament passed the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, which created three new states – Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura – and the union territories of Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. The district council in Mizoram welcomed the decision of the Indian state but violence continued to persist in the Mizo Hills. The disturbance persisted until the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986, which paved the way for Mizoram's statehood in 1987. This peace accord apparently is often referred to and is renowned for being one of the most successful and lasting peace agreements in the world.

Malsawmi Jacob is an independent-bilingual writer presently living in Bangalore, India who is native to the state of Mizoram. She is the oldest of four siblings; two sisters and one brother. Her father was in the Indian army compelling the family to shift from place to place every two years or so. Her earliest childhood memories takes her back to an unnamed village in Mizoram where they were compelled to live for a few years without her father who was away on army duty. This village was where she started her education and was schooled in the Mizo medium, her mother tongue. Jacob recollects this period fondly as a time and place where she acquired knowledge of Mizo folktales from her mother's bedtime stories. After leaving Mizoram her father's posting to Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh provided her with some exposure to the Hindi language in the Army camp school. The next transfer took

them back to the North-east in Shillong, Meghalaya where she continued her schooling at Auxilium Convent, an English medium school. From Shillong her father's next shift was to the capital of Manipur, Imphal where she joined another convent school, Little Flower for about a year. After a year at Little Flower school she was transferred to a government school called Adimjati at Imphal where she developed a passion for reading books because of the school had a robust library. Later years brought Jacob back to Shillong where she resumed her schooling at the Auxilium Convent again and concluded her matriculation. She remembers that her parents supported her decision to take up BA honours in English and the subsequent joy her father displayed on her successfully graduating in the year 1973. Despite financial struggles, she completed her Masters in English from NEHU, Shillong in the year 1975.

Jacob began her professional career as a lecturer and Head of the Department of English, Aizawl College, Mizoram in the year 1975 and continued to work at the same college till 1985. Post a career gap of 22 years she worked as an Assistant Professor of English at St. Claret College, Bangalore for a period of two years from 2005 to 2007. She then took up the role of Senior Project Coordinator at SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) Mumbai, from the year 2007 to 2012. After SPARROW, Mumbai she returned to Bangalore again to work for about a year at St. Claret College from 2013-2014.

Her interest in literary works began as early as when she was child of nine or ten years which continued to develop well into her high school days. At the age of 15 she recollects attempting a novella, a teenage romance, which remains unpublished. The motivations for writing she strongly feels comes from love – 'love for words', 'verses and stories', 'Nursery rhymes', and even 'fairy tales'. The formative influence on her writings have developed from readings of the novels of R.L. Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. Jacob occupies an important place as a Mizo writer in English to publish the first full-fledged novel by a Mizo, *Zorami – A Redemption Song* (2015). The following is a list of ten published books that have been published in chronological order: *Tinkim Dâwn,* a book of Mizo and English Poetry (2003); *Fresh Lease*, a collection of short stories (2005); *Amazing Adventures*, a work on Children's fiction (2006); *A Pushkar Pandit's Tryst with God*, a work of narrative non-fiction (2009); *Magic Mirror Stories*, another work of Children's fiction (2010); *The Messiah*, a narrative non-fiction (2012); *Zorami – A Redemption Song*, a

novel (2015); *Four Gardens and Other Poems*, a collection of poetry (2017); *Blind Spots*, a collection of short stories (2019); and *Zo zêm*, a collection of Mizo poems and essays on poetry (2022).

Malsawmi Jacob also has a number of poems that she has contributed to print anthologies and magazines both in the Mizo vernacular and in the English language: *Zaikung Thar* – 21st Century Mizo Poetry series (2019 and 2021); *Thu leh Hla* – Mizo Academy of Letters monthly magazine (for several years); *Meichher* – a Mizo monthly magazine (two issues); *Being Carried Far Away* – Anthology of Poems and Stories of Women, SPARROW, Mumbai (2009); *Amravati Poetic Prism* – International Multilingual Poetry, edited by Padmaja Iyengar (2016, 2017 and 2018); *Women, Wit and Wisdom* – International Multilingual Poetry of Women Poets edited by Padmaja Iyengar, AuthorsPress (2017); *The Lie of the Land* – Anthology of Indian Poetry in English edited by Goutam Karmakar, Sahitya Akademi (2019); *Dancing the Light* – Poems from Australia and India edited by Robert Maddock Harle and Jaydeep Sarangi, Cyberwit (2020); *Witness* edited by Nabina Das, Red River (2021); *Sahitya Ekhaan* – Bengali and English magazine edited by Shyamashri Ray Karmakar (2021); *Poetry Unites* – Anthology of Verse edited by Shyamolina Saikia (2022); and *Converse Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* – Celebrating 75 Years of Indian Independence edited by Sudeep Sen, Pippa Rann, UK (2022).

She has also published some articles of literary nature, both in her vernacular and English, in journals and magazines which are as follows: "Water Imagery in *The House of Twining Roses* by Nabina Das" in *New Fiction Journal* – An International Journal on contemporary fiction in English (2015); "Chhamhla Ramah" – Delhi Mizo Zirlai Pawl Magazine (2016-2017); and "Mizo Poetry: Which way forward?" Department of English, Mizoram University *Ruby Jubilee Souvenir Magazine* (1979 – 2019). Jacob has also delivered talks and presented papers in various platforms: "Need for a post-colonial look at Mizo Oral Literature" – talk at Department of English, Mizoram University (2019); "Talk on Mizo Oral Literature" – seminar organized by North-east Study Department, Jamia Milia Islamia University, New Delhi (2019); and "A glimpse of Conflict Literature in Mizoram" – reading of short paper followed by a panel discussion in National Conference at Jyoti Nivas Autonomous College, Bangalore (2016).

Manipur is a state within India situated in the North-eastern region of the country. It shares borders with Nagaland to the north, Assam to the west, and Mizoram to the southwest, while being bounded by Myanmar to the south and east. In effect, the state of Manipur is sandwiched by Nagaland in the north and Mizoram in the south. Similar to other states in the northeast, Manipur remains relatively isolated from the rest of India. The name Manipur translates to land of gems. The largest freshwater lake in the North-east Loktak is located in Manipur and the state capital, Imphal, lies at the very heart of the state in the Manipur valley. The Manipur valley which is home to the Meitei community have historically dominated the state of Manipur to such extent that the common usage of the word Manipuri essentially means the Meiteis themselves. As such the use of the term Manipuri and Meitei is used interchangeably within the context of the present study. Roughly two-thirds of the population consists of Meitei people, predominantly residing in the Manipur valley and largely adhering to Hinduism. However, a significant section of the Meitei people follow the traditional and indigenous animistic faith called Sanamahi which is associated with the pre-Hindu era of Manipur. There is also a Meitei muslim community, fairly smaller than the Hindu and the Sanamahi communities, called the Pangals. The remaining portion of the population comprises indigenous hill tribes which includes the Nagas in the hills of the north and the Kukis in the hills of the south. These tribes, organized into various clans and segments, speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family are predominantly Christians like their kith and kin in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram, respectively. It is important here to recognize that the social, cultural, economic and political history of Manipur is predominantly centered around the Meiteis, who are the central focus of this study, as Ngangom is a writer of Meitei origins. The Meiteis speak the Meitei language which, alongside English, serves as the state's official language. Historically, the state of Manipur has had a long and difficult legacy of both internal and external wars. Modern Manipuri history documents the Burmese invasion of 1819 and the subsequent occupation of Manipur for seven years. The Burmese occupation of Manipur from 1819 to 1826 is known for its chaos and anarchy, because Burma took away at least 30,000 Manipuris as prisoners back to Burma, as such the period is popularly known as Seven Years Devastation. The Manipuris did not accept the rule of the Burmese and the Manipur Levy was formed with the aid of the British. The Manipur Levy was an armed force of approximately

3,000 soldiers, trained effectively by the British, to successfully overthrow the Burmese occupation. Though the Burmese were vanquished by this formidable armed force it paved way for the British to influence the administrative affairs of Manipur through the office of a Political Agent. However, it remained an indirect involvement for a fairly long period of time until 1891 when the Anglo-Manipur war broke out due to increasing involvement of the British in the political affairs of Manipur. The British won the war and Manipur became a part of the British empire. The British occupation of Manipur translated into the direct British rule and the end of the people's political status as a sovereign independent state. It may be noted that the influx of foreigners coming into Manipur may be divided into two waves. The first wave was the coming of religious missionaries of Hinduism in the beginning of the eighteenth century among which was Shanti Das Goswami whose impact and influence of converting a significant majority of Meiteis is documented. The second wave of the influx of foreigners was the colonial British administrative rule over Manipur which paved the way for Christian missionaries whose proselytization initiatives were successful in Christianizing the Nagas and Kukis of the hills of Manipur. After the entry of foreigners, there were many movements against the authoritarian character of the feudal and imperial structures of the foreigners' rule. These movements were primarily initiated with the concern to more or less preserve and maintain the distinctive identity of the Manipuri people. As such, the state of Manipur has been witness to a number of revolutionary movements during the pre-merger period, one of which Hijam Irabot Singh, was the architect. Irabot worked to develop a political consciousness among the common people of Manipur through the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasaba so that the indigenous people are given the privilege to enjoy the opportunity and right to develop and maintain their culture, politics and social order according to their own genius. However, Irabot's initiatives drew flak from his adversaries whose objectives were to make Manipur a part of India. Irabot did not support this idea of Manipur losing its indigenous and cultural identity to 'outside' influences. For his many contributions towards building recognition for the indigenous Manipur tradition and culture, Hijam Irabot Singh is known as the founding father of Manipuri nationalism.

The merger of Manipur into the Indian union took place on the 15th October 1949 under some duress according to certain accounts. Post the merger the state of Manipur continued to be witness to a number of revolutionary movements. The

genesis of these movements is assigned to the fact that the 'outsiders' from other parts of India, especially the merchant class, began to dominate and control politically, economically and administratively the affairs of Manipur. The Inner Line Permit (ILP) system which was put in place by the Britishers, to economically, culturally, socially, and politically protect the indigenous rights of the people, however, was withdrawn immediately after Manipur's merger with India. The withdrawal of the ILP allowed a heavy influx of migrant Indians from other parts of the country to take place in the state and was largely perceived as being detrimental to indigenous Manipuri interests. As such, this resulted in the formation of a number of rebel groups in Manipur who endeavored to preserve the distinct social, cultural, political and national identity of the people of Manipur. Some of the armed rebel groups who set out to meet these goals are Meitei State Committee, United National Liberation Front, Revolutionary Government of Manipur, People's Liberation Army, People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, and Kangleipak Communist Party. The pursuit of Manipuri interests as referred to above is more or less comprehensively associated with the dominant Meitei community of Manipur. What makes conditions more nuanced in Manipur is the presence of both Naga and Kuki communities who are indigenous to the hills of Manipur and perceive their social, cultural, economic and political interests as being different and distinct from those of the Meitei majority.

Robin S. Ngangom is a bilingual poet and translator who writes in English and Manipuri. He was born in the year 1959 in Imphal, Manipur. He successfully pursued his graduate studies at the renowned St. Edmund's College, Shillong from the year 1979 to 1981. On completion of his BA in English, he continued to work on his academic career without a break and pursued his Masters in English at NEHU, Shillong from the year 1981 to 1983. He is currently working as an Associate Professor in the Department of English at NEHU, Shillong. Ngangom admits to having written sugary sentimental verse in school and later on he claims to have been in search of a legitimate voice, while believing in a poetry of feeling which can be shared as opposed to mere cerebral poetry.

Ngangom has several book publications to his credit and the following is a list of his significant publications: *Words and Silence*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta (1988); *An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi (1993); *Time's Crossroads*, Disha Books, Orient Longman Ltd., Hyderabad (1994); *Khasia in*

Gwalia, Alun Books, Wales (1995); *A New Book of Indian Poems in English*, Writers Workshop, Calcutta (2000); *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*, NEHU Publications, Shillong (2003); *Confronting Love: Poems*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi (2005); *The Desire of Roots*, Chandrabāghā, Cuttack (2006); *Where the Sun Rises When Shadows Falls: The Northeast*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (2009); *The Other Side Of Terror: An Anthology Of Writings On Terrorism in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi (2009); *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi (2009); *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, HarperCollins Publishers, Noida (2012); and *My Invented Land – New and Selected Poems*, Speaking Tiger, New Delhi (2023).

He has also published articles in journals and magazines like the following: The Telegraph Colour Magazine, Calcutta; Debonair, Bombay; Chandrabāghā, Cuttack; Kayva Bharati, American College, Madurai; Poetry Chronicle, Bombay; Poiesis, Bombay; Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; The Brown Critique, Maharastra; The New Welsh Review, Wales; Kunapipi, University of Aarhus, Denmark; SWAG Magazine, Swansea, Wales; New Statesman & Society, London; Planet: The Welsh Internationalist, Aberystwyth, Wales; Verse, University of Georgia, Athens, US; The Literary Review, New Jersey; and Poetry Wales, Wales. Robin S. Ngangom was conferred honour of being invited to the UK for the UK Year of Literature and Writing (1995). Ngangom is also the recipient of two very significant awards: the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry (1994) and the Katha Award for Translation (1999).

Stanco Pelc's reference to the definition of marginality as outlined by the United Nations University provides for an interesting starting point in a discussion on the notions of marginality. Here are four of those attributes that he highlights that are of significance for the present study: "geographical remoteness (peripheral to the most highly developed and populous areas of a country)," "dispersed, heterogeneous populations of minority ethnic groups living at subsistence levels," "actual or perceived lack, or low levels, of physical and social infrastructure," and "populations with little or no political influence on the decisions affecting their lives" (17). While the attributes address marginality from the perspective of geographical location, heterogeneity of populations, lack or perceived lack of infrastructural development, and absence of political influence on one's own lives, there are other definitions of

marginality that warrant one's attention. For instance, Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines the term marginalization as "To relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group." This particular definition depicts the presence and pressure of an external agency to act upon people i.e.,'to relegate' strongly suggests the role of power and exercise of authority in the marginalization of people groups. Margins are very often used synonymously with terms like edge, boundary, periphery, fringe, and border. When conceptualizing the margins or marginalization one is confronted upfront with the pronounced presence of a center. A center from which the margins are decided and established; the farther one is located from the center the more marginalized one is likely to become. As such, marginalization of an individual or group may manifest itself in various forms such as social marginalization, cultural marginalization, religious marginalization, psychological marginalization, economic marginalization and political marginalization. People that are culturally or ethnically different can be marginalized by another cultural community in all of the above manners. This is because a society functions through rituals, value systems and norms. While the term marginalization may be defined and explained in various ways it must be understood that at a very fundamental level marginalization can in fact be explained as a consequence of a system that produces inequality, exclusion or abnormality.

> [W]e focused our attention on areas and regions that all face similar problems due to their position at the edge (fringes, border,…) – i.e. on the margin of something. That something may be spatial, social, economic, political etc. A 'marginal' position is therefore the starting point of marginality research…. When we are talking about regions or certain areas being in such position we would normally use a notion marginal regions (areas) and the process of putting them in such position is therefore marginalization. Finally the basic characteristic of such regions (areas – social groups, societies) is marginality. (Pelc 13)

The North-east of India because of the racial difference it embodies in its characteristic constitution is looked upon as strange and foreign to the essentialized notion of Indianness and marginalization is more often than not impressed upon it as a result of discrimination. The gaze of the mainstream Indian very often excludes and abnormalizes people groups belonging to the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and

Manipur – in general the North-east resulting in a process of being put in a position of inequality and marginalization. Marginalization also occurs when there is a lack of respect for differences and as a result one is relegated to a position of exception created by the exclusion of cultural norms and values associated with people groups of the region. Differences and distinctiveness associated with the North-east is conspicuously made visible in the unique histories of the myriad of people groups who are inhabitants of the region. In other words, the Mongoloid racial people groups of the North-east genealogically trace their origins to the east. Also, associated closely with this race-oriented link to the eastern neighbors of India are extended forms of connections related to traditions, customs, language, food culture, sense of dress, etc. that depicts a separateness from the predominantly Aryan and Dravidian races found across the length and breadth of mainland India. However, one must not be mistaken about differences being restricted to only the dissimilarities between the North-east and the rest of India as the region is affected by internal variances between people groups native to this frontier space. Each demarcated territorial region has a number of tribes and clans that do not fit into the majoritarian identity of the dominant community of a given state. For instance the Bodos in Assam, Maras in Mizoram, Nagas and Kukis in Manipur and the Nagas, it is well known, are a people group of multiple tribes, each tribe owing its allegiance to its finer point of indigeneity; presenting a rather nuanced picture of the realities embedded within the state of Nagaland. It becomes evident that a significant portion of the population consists of tribal communities originating from various ethnic backgrounds, each preserving its distinct tribal and ethnic lifestyle, cultures, customs, and beliefs. These communities are organized into clans, each with its own unique culture and practices, residing in isolated hamlets with little interaction with neighbouring clans, often viewing each other with suspicion or hostility. Prior to British colonial rule, the North-east region maintained close ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties with South and Southeast Asia. However, the imposition of colonial power by the British led to the hasty integration of the region into India without considering its demographic complexities or the aspirations of its people. The arbitrary drawing of international borders between the region and other countries like, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh etc. further exacerbated tensions in the region. The British ultimately relinquished control over the region to independent India amidst protests and resistance from indigenous people groups from

the North-east who had nurtured aspirations of becoming independent on the departure of the British from India. Once becoming a part of India, the people groups from the region continued to imagine themselves as different and distinct from the idea of India leading to numerous conflicts between the centre and the region. However, the Indian state's approach to resolving conflicts in the North-east has very often been at odds with the region's realities and aspirations.

During the colonial period, Robert Reid, the governor of the state of Assam from 1937 to 1942 draws one's attention to the fact that there is a conspicuous difference between the many varied people groups of the North-east and the rest of India. He refers to what he calls the "non-Indian origin" (25) of the people of the Northeast and further highlights the "accidental" (19) nature of how the people of the region have come to be part of the Indian state.

> These areas I have enumerated differ markedly among themselves, but they have this one characteristic in common, that neither racially, historically, culturally nor linguistically have any affinity with the people of the plains, or the peoples of India proper. It is only by historical accident and as a natural administrative convenience that they have been tacked on to an Indian province. (Reid 19)

The above extract denotes that this frontier space is rather distinct from India primarily on the grounds of race, origins, culture and language. One must be reminded here that the North-east of India is located at what is often referred to as the Mongolian fringe. It is a region that occupies the liminal space between two great civilizations of the world, the Indian and the Chinese. One of the more prominent factors that contributes significantly to the complex nature of the problems, for the Indian state, is that it has on its side of the cartographic and territorial demarcation ethnic people groups originating from the other side of the international border. The first home minister of independent India Sardar Vallabhai Patel was cognizant of the ground reality of how the condition of ethnic people groups belonging to another race, found on the Indian side of the boundary, could lead to potential challenges for the nascent independent Indian state.

> All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnically and culturally not different from the Tibetans and Mongoloids. The undefined state of the frontier

> and the existence on our side of a population with its affinities to the Tibetans or Chinese have all the elements of the potential trouble between China and ourselves. (Saikia and Baishya 7)

Both Reid and Patel address what can only be labelled as the obvious point of reference depicting racial and physiognomical differences associated with the various people groups of Northeast vis-à-vis the rest of India. This dialectical stance of difference between the Northeast and mainstream India finds resonance in almost every aspect of the relationship of the region with the center. This apparent consciousness of being excluded from the mainstream Indian sensibilities finds its impact on the way the literature of the region describes modes of expression that deal with indigenous particularities. In a way attempting to voice apprehensions in the form of literary articulations that reflect the rootedness of concerns in the unique eco-system of the region and its incapacity to gain legitimacy within the framework of the grand narrative of the Indian mainstream.

> The sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era. (Misra, *The Oxford Anthology* xviii)

As such, literature from the region too has developed into literary works that are defined by marked difference and distinctiveness when juxtaposed against the literary canons of mainstream India. In the North-east, particularly in regions where tribal societies underwent textualization in the wake of Christianity and the establishment of Western education systems marks a profound shift in how knowledge and stories are preserved and transmitted. This transition is not merely a matter of adopting a new medium for literary communication but often entails a re-evaluation and reinterpretation of cultural narratives and identities. As North-east societies move from oral traditions to written texts, they grapple with questions of rootlessness, authenticity, representation, and continuity with their past. In attempting to engage with literature from such regions, it's crucial to recognize this transition and its implications. The literary output of these regions reflects not only the diverse experiences and worldviews of their inhabitants but also their efforts to reconcile traditional knowledge with new forms of literary expression and understanding. Moreover, the emergence of English as a literary language in these regions adds

another layer of complexity. English literature from hill states and valleys develop their own distinct traditions and themes, often diverging from mainstream Indian English literature while still contributing to the broader tapestry of literary expression. As scholars and enthusiasts engage with literature from these regions, it is essential to approach it with an understanding of the historical context and the uniqueness it represents. Asaduddin in his article, which forms an introduction of the edited book *Literatures from Northeast India – Beyond the Centre Periphery Debate* opines that,

> [W]riters and literary historians from the Northeast have often defined literatures produced in this space in opposition to what they perceive as mainland Indian literature and separate from Indian literature. A binary was and is established in which mainland Indian literature … is seen as the centre and literatures produced in the Northeast as the periphery. (1)

Prasanta Das opines that the poets from the Northeast have been subjected to exclusion from the literary space of the Indian nation through the act of anthology making – Jeet Thayil's anthology of *60 Great Indian Poets* (2008) according to Das conspicuously leaves out poets from the North-east, specifically the Shillong poets.

> The claims of completeness that Thayil makes for his anthology seek to validate is as representing the nation in all its complexity…. However, the exclusion of Ngangom, Kharmawphlang, and Nongkynrih means they are given no role in defining the national imaginary. (20)

Das elaborates that these poets are discounted from being considered authentic representatives of the larger Indian tradition or as Baral terms it the great tradition of literary expressions due to the political nature of their poetry. Further Das, associates and likens them with poets operating outside a great tradition like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish and Yehuda Amichai, "…who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people" (20). The emphasis on conforming to a great tradition in literary criticism and critical thought finds mention in the seminal work of Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). In fact Eliot asserts that there is a need for novel works of composition to conform to the great tradition "…but its fitting in is a test of its value – a test, it is true..." (15). He is further critical of the inclination in readers and critics

to dwell with satisfaction on the production of difference in a new literary work. Eliot finds the departure from the great tradition that characterizes a novel work of literary production highly problematic. Eliot assigns any value of significance, worthy of appreciation, only to those aspects of the novel work that bear an unquestionable affiliation to the great tradition.

> His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (15)

While conforming to the same thought process, a number of other literary figures from the North-east share this trait of being different and distinctive with the poets like Ngangom, Kharmawphlang, and Nongkynrih that is often promptly dismissed by the Indian literary canon or great tradition. Some of the other more renowned names are Temsula Ao, Yumlembam Ibomcha, Bimal Chaudhuri, Mamang Dai, Saratchand Thiyam, Esther Syiem and, of course, within the context of this study Easterine Kire and Malsawmi Jacob. These literary figures from the North-east endeavour to paint an authentic picture of the socio-political and historical realities of their respective spaces, however, they are most likely to remain excluded from an Indian anthology of literary works because it presents indigenous characteristics that do not conform to the great Indian tradition.

> However, the distinct narratives invite various challenges for scholars to look into questions of "literary" credence of this body of work that naturally involves narratives of deep ethnic undertones, tribal mores, and political anxiety. (Longkumer and Menon 19)

As such, the literary engagement from the region is more often than not representative of the plight of their land which ranges from voices of resistance, violence, detachment, rootlessness, deep despair, loss, lament, anguish and defiance. This poetics of difference as it unfolds between the centre and the North-east is often ignored and not given adequate attention, which is, the need for acceptance of a literary endeavour that focuses on the differences and distinctiveness that exist at the regional level. The premise is often that concerns represented by local and particularized interests of the people does not warrant a legitimate space to be assigned a position of significance in the grand scheme of things. In fact, all little narratives must conform to the norms of the grand narratives to acquire some level of legitimacy. There is a

general perception that no matter which region one is located across the vast Indian state, Indian literature is one and uniform even if it is written in many languages. However, Asaduddin highlights emphatically that in embracing the complexities involving literary space of a region like the North-east vis-à-vis the rest of mainland India, "We gradually discovered the utter inadequacy of such a definition" (1). The ground reality is that literatures of the North-east bear attributes of an other which is assigned a position of strangeness. A racial Mongoloid other whose identity is marked by a significant departure from the well-grounded notions of the racial Indian self – strictly defined by an established notion of Indianness leading to the exclusion of literatures of the North-east from the Indian literary canon.

The need to generate recognition and representation through literary works of the lived realities of the people, which is deeply ingrained and embedded in the region, cannot be overemphasized in the context of the North-east. Charles Chasie remarks, "It is our roots and our culture that give meaning to life and raises mere existence to purpose and living" (259). However, as has been observed the North-eastern states of India have been conspicuously excluded from the grand Indian literary tradition which unveils the invisible and underlying structures of the silencing of indigenous communities like the Nagas, Mizos and the Meiteis. The exclusion and abnormalization of North-easterners' lived realities vis-à-vis the idea of the Indianness raises questions about belonging and unbelonging as well. These very lived realities are what defines the people of the region – their identity as Naga, Mizo or Meitei – a silencing, exclusion and abnormalization of the identity of the people groups effectively translates into a rejection of the North-eastern other from the idea of Indianness. Several North-east Indian authors have worked to voice their concerns towards such forms of discrimination through works of fiction and poetry to present the lived-realities that define the people of the region. And within the context of this present study Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom are the three writers whose select works will help us study and analyse marginalization of the people of the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

> Emerging out of the colonial – ethnographic representation and seeking consolidation of ethnic and cultural identities in postcolonial time, the writers from the Northeast India in their works describe themselves and

> their cultures, express their views and ideas, feelings and emotions, thereby signifying their cultural and ethnic particularity. (Baral 5)

One of the most renowned authors of Nagaland is Easterine Kire who has extensively contributed to the field of novels and short stories, where she represents 'silenced' voices that have been historically suppressed for a number of years. Kire in an interview to Swati Daftuar, which was published on the 11th of February 2013 in the *The Hindu* stated that "The stories that still need telling are what I call the people stories. There are still so many stories in the land waiting to be shared" (Daftuar, "For Easterine"). Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and *Life on Hold* (2011) are both an attempt at realistic literary representations of the people stories of the Naga community and the struggles that they had to go through in fighting for freedom from the Indian state. Both historical works of fiction represent the lived experiences of the Nagas during the bitter period of intensive struggle against the Indian state's use of its armed forces to subdue the Nagas. *Bitter Wormwood* depicts the depth of her well-researched approach committed to providing the reader an insight into the web of complexities associated with the Naga struggle for independence. This is substantially evident in the portrayal of the characters and the journey that is set for them within the framework of the novel. Kire subtly hints at a solution to the Naga problem which is to come to terms with one's own identity – the Naga self. The indigenous bitter wormwood plant used as a cure for cuts and to ward of evil spirits is a reminder to the Nagas about the strength embedded in the Naga traditional way of life. Another work of Kire which expresses the pain and sacrifices of the Naga people in their fight for political sovereignty is a novella titled *Life on Hold*. It is a touching story about two lovers separated and divided by destiny as the young man opts to join the struggle for Naga freedom. The protagonist's heartfelt commitment to the Naga cause is driven by a genuine belief that he is fighting an honourable battle but gradually discovers the depth of decay that has crept its way in to the struggle – questioning its very integrity. An aspiration of the Naga people fought hard to determine a better life for future generations becomes a parallel war, one against the Indian state and the other against the Naga self who has betrayed the sanctity of the original cause.

Malsawmi Jacob's novel *Zorami* (2015) is a narrative that represents the many unvoiced accounts of the Mizos from a dark period of their history. The novel is a story about a woman protagonist's progression from a young girl to becoming a woman

who successfully struggles through her life's personal adversities. At the backdrop of the protagonist' ordeals is the most difficult historical period of disturbance which was fostered by the Mizo nationalist freedom movement between 1966 to 1986. For Jacob, the quest of writing *Zorami* began when the oft repeated Mizoram an island of peace among the other states of the North-east appeared to gloss over questions around the lived-experiences of the Mizo's fight for independence – many untold stories remain buried deep under the "island of peace" (Sarangi 3) caption. She alludes that it would be a crime to leave unarticulated what people of the time had been forced by circumstances to traverse through. The atrocious violence, human rights violations, and deaths which had occurred as a result of the operations between the armed rebels and the Indian army Jacob felt deeply affected every Mizo life. The novel also showcases the author's endeavours to depict through the literary arts the language and culture of the Mizo community. Jacob's style of story-telling reveals a technique that intersperses story with song and poetry which she assigns to the way Mizo folktales historically and orally influenced storytellers, "…they are mostly quotes from real songs, which I translated into English" (Sarangi 5). Malsawmi Jacob has also written several poems in her *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (2017) that attempt to break the silence of the Mizos in being denigrated to the margins. A complete section of poetry is dedicated to roots of the Mizos tracing their genealogical origins, a poetic presentation of famed tales of the past, and a vivid description of the disturbance in the Mizo hills. She uses her poetry to describe the differences between the mainstream and the marginalized Mizo who has been rendered inarticulate. Another section deals with angst as a couple of poems are fixed on the searing pain associated with the onslaught of violence, death and destruction in her beloved hills of Mizoram and the last section hope rises out of the dark mist through the resurrection of Christ to overwhelm the most feared and revered grip that death has on mortals.

Robin S. Ngangom is a North-eastern writer who belongs to Manipur and is majorly a poet who has written number of poems in his works like *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). In *Words and the Silence* he talks about how only traces of dying people remain, abandoned roots and valley, enslavement of poetry, rustic songs disappearing, culture of inhumanity, selling of one's indigeneity, ambiguity of the mainstream, and a loss of culture – longing for one's roots are some of the thematic concerns. In *Time's*

Crossroads his poetry deals with critical concerns like how hope fades away, peoples' blank stares into infinite spaces, hidden enemy roaming around for blood, burrower from the tough plains vis-à-vis gullible hills, contrast between knowledge and ignorance, reputation for being silent, the presence of unnamed fears, being in the thick of life and death, working to keeping death at bay, and attempting to celebrate life amidst death are among many other concerns. The third book of Ngangom's poetry selected for the present study, *The Desire of Roots*, deals with thematic concerns which address the need to articulate even the unspeakable, reality about freedom – not really being free, harvesting words which grow on their own, realization of one's own roots, preservation of native customs and traditions, a homeland where one can recognise oneself, and how one's homeland relentlessly pursues one everywhere. Jayanta Mahapatra's comments on Robin S. Ngangom's poetry very aptly define his works, "[T]he poems unobtrusively matter their way into one's experience. Its clean images and straightforward statements reveal a spirit gently, yet firmly, in place – a place where landscape and soulscape are one" (Ngangom; First page after front cover "The Desire") Ngangom's deep longing for a connect with that ideal space in the historical and ancestral past and the elusiveness of it all is perhaps what brings together the "landscape and soulscape" in the crisp words of his poetry.

Most scholarly works around the time of the commencement of this research initiative were found largely restricted to critical articles in published books and select journals. As such, the merit of performing a full-fledged doctoral research, it was strongly felt, would contribute more significantly to the due reconstruction of knowledge about the region in relation to mainstream India. Although there have been many works on the marginalization of the North-east communities of India, the concept of marginalization and silencing of these communities has been largely neglected and as such has not been given adequate attention. A misrepresentation of the lived experiences and realities of Nagas, Mizos, and Meiteis through certain stereotypes and presuppositions need due analysis. Smith highlights how misrepresentations are constructed or created by those in positions of power "…a whole past is 'created' and then given the authority of truth" (77). And the constructed truths are then perpetuated by the dominant groups to the detriment of the cultural minorities or indigenous communities, "…indigenous languages, knowledges and cultures have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned in academic

and popular discourses" (22). These acts of silencing and misrepresentation are in fact what feed into the creation of inequality and marginality of the people of the North-east. The analysis will take place through the primary and secondary texts to highlight the authentic voices articulated through the lived-experiences of the literary representations of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob, and Robin S. Ngangom. Moreover, since there is a disconnect with the embedded truths of the region, a misunderstanding between mainstream India and the region continues to be fuelled. The current study will specifically be an attempt to understand the silencing of Naga, Mizo and Meitei voices and how stereotypical misrepresentations of the region can be altered through a representation of the lived-experiences embedded in their reality. The study will be conducted based on the select works of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob, and Robin S. Ngangom; these authors and poets have widely worked for the welfare of the North-eastern communities in general while focusing on the Naga, Mizo and Meitei conditions more specifically.

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To carry out a study of the marginalization of the North-east vis-à-vis mainstream Indian society through Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* and *Life on Hold*, Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* and select poems from *Four Gardens and Other Poems* and select poems from Robin S. Ngangom's *Words and the Silence*, *Time's Crossroads* and *The Desire of Roots*.
2. To study and examine the stereotypes and presuppositions constructed about the North-eastern communities of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur which contributes to their continual marginalization
3. To study and describe the Naga, Mizo, and Manipur lived-experiences of marginalization through an analysis of primary and secondary texts.

The study attempts to analyze the problem of marginalization of the North-east vis-à-vis mainstream Indian society and attempts to situate marginalization of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur through the select primary works. The select primary works are a representation of the Naga, Mizo and Manipur experiences of marginalization, silencing, exclusion and abnormalization. Mainstream Indian presentation of the conflicts and issues in the North-east has always been of violence, insurgency, rebellions and secession against the Indian state.

> Assertions of any identity other than the national identity were viewed as a threat to the state and a subversive nature especially when it was articulated into ideological formulations and a social practice that stimulated the conception of a radically different future… diversity was merely tolerated by the state… it was underplayed and if possible the attempt was to assimilate the diverse and put them all into one melting pot. (Borgohain 12)

The justification of the exercise of state authority and attempts to homogenize North-east India is often rationalized through the arguments like violence is an inherent trait of the people of the region and rebellions are marked by the aspirations of seceding from India. These stereotypes and presuppositions about the region being categorically affixed to notions of violence, insurgency, rebellions and secession need to be analysed and re-examined. It does not realistically take into account the localized nature of the poetics of differences found embedded in the historical and present day accounts of the people from Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. The study is conducted to understand the factors that were involved in the construction of these stereotypes about the North-east and its impact on the communities who are marginalized on this basis. This study will highlight the struggles of being perceived as an alien and the accompanying misery of the North-eastern communities of the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris, and how it has impacted the process of their acceptance and sense of belonging to the Indian nation. It will also study how the stereotypes have also largely been constructed on the basis of facial or physical appearances and how they have contributed to the exclusion and abnormalization of the North-eastern communities. The lived-experiences and realities portrayed through the stories and poetry will shed a light on perhaps why people from North-eastern states like Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur hesitate to consider and call themselves Indian in the same way as most mainstream Indian communities. According to Ted Gurr, “The politics of identity are based most fundamentally on persistent grievances about inequalities and past wrongs, conditions that are a part of the heritage of most minorities in most countries” (14).

The primary aim of the research is to understand how the concept of marginalization works within the context of the North-east, particularly the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri contexts, through a close reading and an in depth analysis of the select primary works. Based on the aim and objectives of the study, an approach of

thematic analysis will be taken into account. The current study will be based on both primary and secondary data, where the primary data will be inferred from the select primary works and the secondary data will be collected from seminal theoretical texts, articles, journals and research papers that have been performed on related disciplinary studies. The approach and method of study employed will involve the application of postcolonial theories, subaltern studies, poststructuralist thoughts, postmodern perspectives, subaltern studies, nation and nationalism, concepts around biopolitics and phenomenology and post-positivist realist schools of thought. The current study will, thus, link the fictionalized real life accounts and experiences alluded to by the authors portrayed through their novels and poetry and how they have raised their voices to break the silences and stereotypes through Easterine Kire's "people stories" (Daftuar, "For Easterine") and Malsawmi Jacob's "real people" (Sarangi 4) and Robin S. Ngangom's "poetry of witness" (Ngangom 300). The study of the select novels and works of poetry will attempt to articulate the marginalization of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis by questioning stereotypes and presuppositions that have been constructed about the region. Lastly, the study will focus on establishing that there is a reality primarily driven by a poetics of difference that needs to be duly respected between the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur vis-à-vis the Indian state.

This chapter presents an overall approach to the study. It attempts to set the context of the study by providing a background on the North-east of India in general and a particularized account of each of the states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur. Biographical notes about the authors have been supplemented to the detailed backgrounds of their respective home states. The key concept of marginalization has also been discussed and the objectives of the study have duly been listed out with the endeavour to provide greater clarity and direction to the aims of the research initiative. Moreover, the primary works and their relevance in the context of the present study have also been deliberated upon and problematized with respect to how persistent stereotypes and racial discrimination of the North-east, particularly the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, continues to contribute to the marginalization of the region. Unfortunately, these stereotypes go on to create greater and greater divide between the Indian mainstream and the North-east to the detriment of the Indian nation – as people communities of the region like the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris are consistently excluded from the definitions of Indianness. This is mainly due to a

presence of a poetics of difference characterized by indigenous attributes of the people which the Indian grand narrative is unable to accommodate as definitive of the idea of India. A brief outline of the research approach and methodology has been highlighted to depict the theoretical aspects that have been incorporated to implement the present study.

The second chapter of this study is titled "Towards a Poetics of Difference" and provides the theoretical background to the research initiative. At a very fundamental level the content of this chapter sets the tone for the entire study and provides the literature review for the research. It opens with a focus on the theoretical concept of structuralism and how its system building tendencies promote affinity for uniformity and then explores the difference including tendencies of poststructural, postcolonial, subaltern, postmodern, nation and nationalism, phenomenological, biopolitical, and postpositivist reality studies. This involves theoretical inputs from the likes of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Francois Lyotard, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, J. Maggio, Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Anthony D. Smith, Edmund Husserl, Giorgio Agamben and Satya P. Mohanty, Paula M.L. Moya to name a few.

The third chapter is titled "Exterior's Gaze and Interior's Self Recognition". It unearths the homogenizing tendencies of grand narratives which are closely associated with the Euro-centric world view that assumes that norms and values of West are unequivocally the standards by which the rest of the world should be measured. The chapter suggests that the postcolonial Indian state knowingly or unknowingly adopts the same Euro-centric sensibility in its dealing with the North-east of India demanding an unquestionable affiliation to the Indian grand narrative despite the reality of a poetics of difference. The Indian state's approach to the North-east often constructs stereotypes and presuppositions about the region by misrepresenting the voices of indigeneity as signs of aggression, rebellion, insurgency and secession. The chapter reveals that the articulation of the self's interior voice helps the North-east establish its distinct identity defined by the realities of the social, cultural and political locations. There is a strong emphasis on the difference including theoretical approaches of the poststructuralist, postcolonial, subaltern, postmodern and biopolitical thoughts that aid in breaking down the negative constructs about the North-east. However, both the conflict between the rigid notion of India or Indianness and the oppositional

essentialist forces at play in the distinct physical characteristics of the Naga, Mizo, or Manipuri identity often gives rise to tensions, underscoring a persistent deadlock.

The fourth chapter is titled “Breaking the Impasse” and attempts to find solutions to the conundrum thrown up by the nuanced set of socio-political conditions of unrest in the North-east. Often the stereotypical assumptions about the people of the North-east designates them with the quality of an inherent tendency towards violence, bloodshed and lawlessness. The violent conflict in the Naga, Mizo or Meitei scenario is projected to be driven by factional rivalries amidst the people groups of the region. Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology helps explore the provisions of the select works to delve into the essence of the conflict in the North-east of India. It further examines the oppositional forces at play of the essentialist, positivist and foundationalist claims of identity between both the centre and the North-east region. Moreover, it takes into account the Indian state’s priority of nation-building project which is necessary for maintaining the overall health of keeping the Indian nation together. However, attempts to homogenize and assimilate the cultural minority people groups like the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis through a monocultural integrationist approach is rendered problematic. As such it explores the potential need to re-define and re-work who or what makes up the definition of an Indian. The theoretical concepts of postpositivist reality whose advocates are Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M.L. Moya will be explored in detail to arrive at ways to break the deadlock. It will endeavour to argue the urgent need for a more inclusive and accommodative framework for defining Indianness through a close analysis of the primary works. The slogan unity in diversity is a part of the rich tradition of the Indian democracy and its relevance with respect to the Northeast is unquestionable.

The final chapter will sum up the arguments and critical views of the study which have been deliberated upon and arrive at a conclusion regarding the findings of this research.

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Chapter II

Towards a Poetics of Difference

This chapter endeavours to provide insight into theoretical frameworks that endorse systematic, centralized, and standardized approaches. In response to the homogenizing tendencies of such approaches, it explores alternative theoretical perspectives that challenge these approaches. It provides the theoretical background to the present research initiative as it sets the overall tone for the entire study. In other words, this chapter is in fact a literature review for the present study. The chapter contends that viewpoints countering centralization and homogenization arise from a recognition of the necessity to embrace the unique differences and distinctions inherent in the North-east of India—a poetics of difference. In that effort the postcolonial Indian state often overlooks the importance of differences and distinctiveness that are deeply embedded within the lived-experiences of people groups of the North-east. This poetics of difference strives to foster a discourse and dialogue about the region by genuinely connecting with its indigenous roots, exploring how an identity consciousness in this region differs from the rest of India. To that end, the theoretical involvement of the important thinkers like Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Francois Lyotard, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Gayathri Chakrabarty Spivak, J. Maggio, James C. Scott, Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Anthony D. Smith, Margaret Moore, Giorgio Agamben, Edmund Husserl, Satya P. Mohanty, Paula M.L. Moya, and Michael R. Hames-Garcia are integral to the fulfilment of the aims of the study.

Humanity is often inclined to constantly define the world around it through familiar and fixed frames of references. The need for a recognizable and habitual space that consistently secures a zone of comfort; providing for a continuity in lived experiences that one has come to be conversant with. Where structures and systems make strong arguments in favor of neatly classified and organized accounts that impart expositions representative of unquestionable ideological perspectives on life; bequeathing a certain sense of the sacred to it. These priorities are reflective of vigorous structures that attempt to explicate a universalized order of things where congruence is celebrated. The contributions of Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure in his posthumously published work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) is seminal in helping one gain a clear perspective on structuralist thoughts. In a way, Saussure's

elucidation of the structure of language and the certainties with which it could be expounded to form a stable ground for how ultimately fixed structures contribute to a systematic order of life. Stuart Sim points out while taking Saussure's inputs into consideration that "language above all was a system: a system with rules and regulations (internal grammar) that governed how the various elements of language interacted" (4). This linguistic model works to define a structuralist analytical basis which could be applied generally to all systems making the assumption that every system had an internal grammar that governs all of its operations. In analyzing the implications of the above, it comes to the fore that incidents, situations, and experiences that fall within the ambit of the aforementioned internal rules of operations will be acknowledged as meaningful and relevant. The system's fixed frameworks prove to be critical in providing explanations and justifications for all occurrences that are familiar and conform to the rules of operation; lending to it a sense of uniformity in general. Other structuralists also subscribe fervently to the spirit of conformity to systematic orders of existence by upholding and championing the cause for complementary forms of thoughts and actions. As such for Claude Levi-Strauss, an anthropologist with structuralist leanings, every particular detail in the making of an organized body of thought was highly significant and that there were no random elements. The rationale being, the discernment of the principles on which each structure operates "whether the system in question was tribal myth, the advertising industry or the world of literature or fashion", (Sim 4) it is ultimately all the same, in other words, variations of a centralized blueprint. Every single aspect of the analytical concepts under the structuralists neatly carved themselves into place with no loose ends to entertain. In the field of literary studies it is mainly concerned "with the elaboration of broad typologies of narratives or narrative grammars which seek to explore and classify the workings of literature; individual texts tend to be evoked as broader categories and are rarely studied in their own right " (Macey 366). This could further be witnessed in the dismissal of certain categories of writings due to their lack of affinity towards well-established literary canons. Writings that attempt to speak of characteristics that represent the specificities of a localized lived-experience are excluded and denied the right to articulation.

One of the more apparently visible oppositions to the structuralists' approach was from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction.

Deconstruction is discussed in great detail in his work *Of Grammatology* (1967). The concepts around deconstruction was and continues to be influential because it was directed against the system-building side of structuralism. It worked in opposition to the idea that all phenomena could be reduced to the workings of systems which strongly assumes that there is total control over one's environment. Sharman refers to Derrida's criticism against the tendencies of centers "to rule over the system of thought remaining unsullied and unimpeachable, by belonging to itself…" (87). Derrida's efforts were concentrated towards the demonstration that language was unstable and consequentially the instability of systems in general. By contrast, Saussure's input towards language as a system of communication based on an inherent grammar focused on how language is made up of signs; which consisted of two parts. The signifier (word) and the signified (concept), the combination of which resulted in an act of mental understanding to form the sign. Though the relationship between the word and the object it named may be arbitrary, convention had it that they did not change and remained stable and predictable; providing for a strong structural foundation. For Derrida the relationship between signifier and signified was not without problems in the performance of a communicative act. Through his concept of différance (meaning both difference and deferral) he describes how slippage of meaning always occurred and that signs were not predictable entities and that the relationship between signifier and signified was characteristically unstable. Furthermore, the process of deconstruction provides for a myriad of opportunities to generate new and unpredictable meanings. He makes a strong emphasis on how différance intervenes into the process of communication to prevent a completeness of meaning from establishing itself. At a very fundamental level, the poststructuralist thought may be described as "an insistence on the inevitable plurality and instability of meaning, a distrust of systematic scientificity…" (Macey 309). One cannot but witness, the heavy emphasis on difference and on the failure to conform to norms or to system-building when examining the influence of deconstruction; which is very characteristic of the postmodern philosophical spirit too.

Another major figure whose efforts against the system-building and difference-excluding proclivities of structuralist thought was Michel Foucault. Foucault's list of notable works among others include *The Order of Things* (1966), *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). His analysis of the structural

maxims leads one to the emphasis on the fact of difference, once again. Foucault's interest goes beyond just the focus on difference, there is an examination of difference in relation to marginalized communities or groups whose differences lead to their exclusion from political power; and they are as varied as the mentally ill, homosexuals and prisoners. The projects associated with structuralism, modern culture and enlightenment have in many ways been bound to the marginalization and denigration of difference by establishing strict norms of conduct. Foucault speaks about the formation of regimented institutions such as hospitals, asylums, and prisons in order to manage the different. The aforementioned conditions of deviation from fixed rules and norms of behavior and conduct substantially leads to the alienation and othering of people. "This insistence on the norm at the expense of the different is all part of the authoritarianism that thinkers like Foucault associate with modern culture" (Sim 6).

The spirit of anti-authoritarianism found in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) is considered to be one of the most prominent voices of the postmodern outlook on life. Lyotard is a staunch critic of the grand narrative, that is, theories that claim to be capable of explaining everything. Knowledge in the postmodern world is argued to be an invaluable commodity and whosoever controls knowledge ultimately exercises political control. Lyotard, as such, stresses on the need to ensure that the dissemination of knowledge is kept as open and accessible as possible for everyone. This is because grand narratives are the modes through which knowledge is communicated by those in centralized political positions and consequentially exert monopoly over others. As such, the unwillingness of grand narratives to change and be reinterpreted in the light of new social, political or cultural changes and thus remain impregnable is found wanting. Lyotard is highly skeptical of such grand narratives that do not create space for criticism or the need for revision; and whose authority is not be questioned or doubted.

> Lyotard's own distrust of 'grand narratives' is grounded in suspicions about the nature of narrative and history itself: narrative history is a story told by dominant classes and groups in a bid to legitimate and 'naturalize' their power. (Macey 236)

His later philosophical engagements is concerned with what he terms as "event" (Sim 8) the concept of "différend" (Sim 9) and the "sublime" (Sim 9). For Lyotard "event" is an occurrence that drastically alters the way one sees the world and it makes one

doubt all ideological assumptions in the process. In other words, it represents the breaking down of the theorizing capability of "grand narratives" (Sim 7). To accept that events are relevant is to acknowledge that there are phenomena that cannot be predicted and that there are limitations to grand narratives which further allows for an openness to the possibilities embedded in the future. This is very critical for postmodern thinkers, because openness is an indicator of faith, and as such the future cannot be determined in advance otherwise all human endeavors will be rendered meaningless. An event for Lyotard is "…not part of a chronological sequence, but the fact that something happens and changes everything, or rather the fact of something happening and introducing a break in the space-time continuum" (Macey 236). The term différend as coined by Lyotard is an irresolvable dispute, where consensus is not possible, due to fundamental positions of differences between the parties concerned. "A *différend* cannot be resolved; at best, a partial resolution can be negotiated" (Macey 237). In actual political practice, there is a tendency for one party to exert its influence and force to resolve the differences to promote one's own particular interest. Resorting to the imposition of force to settle an irresolvable conflict leads to the exclusion of the victimized party from having an adequate voice. According to Lyotard it is the responsibility of philosophers to aid such voiceless parties to find ways to overcome acts of suppression; to come to terms with a language or discourse that enables them to find their voices. Furthermore, any totalizing philosophy was found to be problematic by Lyotard as it meant that such structures assumed to possess the answers to all questions in life. In line with the notion of the 'Third Critique' of Immanuel Kant one's attention is drawn to the presence of a schism created by the sublime in any given body of knowledge. This concept of the sublime creates a challenge for the claims of total knowledge because it represents areas of the inconceivable and constantly occupies a space beyond man's power to explain everything. For Lyotard, as a postmodern thinker, the sublime is "…proof that no philosophical theory could provide a total picture of existence", and that "…all attempts to construct a grand narrative would be undermined by the fact of the sublime" (Sim 8). As there is an inherent attempt made by the grand narratives to exclude the different and unpredictable so as to exert power and control, Lyotard goes on to say that resistance at little narrative level is an ethical undertaking on behalf of the cause of the 'different'; and this difference is to be vigorously protected under all conditions.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist thoughts are inspired by deconstructionist world views and thus understand social, cultural and political relations with reference to linguistic structures. Such critics argue that meaning emerges from systems of internal differences within languages, humans inevitably interpret the world through a relative lens. Meaning remains elusive as it is shaped by the myriad possibilities of what it is not, thereby consistently deferred to some extent. Given that meaning only exists within the shifting and unstable dynamics of signification webs, to which humans have exclusive access, objective truth becomes unattainable. The pursuit of truth or objective knowledge is therefore viewed as grounded in a simplistic representational theory of language, underpinned by flawed assumptions. Firstly, the belief in a direct correspondence between signs and their real-world referents, and secondly, the notion that intrinsic meaning resides within those referents, divorced from human thought or action. As such, knowledge, as mediated by language, cannot be deemed objective. Poststructuralist and postmodern critics tend to propose that rather than attempting to understand the nature of the self, we should acknowledge that it lacks an inherent essence. According to this viewpoint, the self cannot possess a fixed and homogenous nature as subjectivity is inseparable from the grammatical structures that shape our cognition; it is, in fact, constructed by these structures. Given that individuals exist only in relation to evolving networks of meaning, and continually differ from themselves as interpretations shift over time, the notion of a unified and stable self is merely a fiction of thought. Similarly, social and cultural identities are deemed fictitious since the selves they purportedly denote resist being definitively defined, fixed, or categorized. As such, poststructuralist and postmodern thoughts provide for the acknowledgement of the presence and existence of alternative perspectives, knowledges, identities and experiences.

The North-eastern part of India is a region of the country which is distinct in multiple ways from the rest of India. There is an apparent physiognomic difference in the appearance of the people; consequently made more conspicuous by the distinctness of customs and traditions. Most languages of the region are linked to the Tibeto-Burman family giving a unique linguistic category to the region when compared to the rest of India. Geographically speaking, excluding the state of Assam, the dominant landscapes that capture the imagination of people are the mountains and hills, which stand in stark contrast to the plains of mainland India.

> The region seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians: its lush green landscape evokes the picture of another part of monsoon Asia, and the local people, in the eyes of many, look racially different. (Baruah, *Durable Disorder* xv).

A survey that was carried out by Joy L.K. Pachuau, highlighted in her book *Being Mizo* (2014), brings to the forefront interesting perceptions about North-easterners in the capital city of New Delhi which reifies the notions of a troubled distinctiveness for mainstream Indians. "...the Northeast is a region that resonated with unfamiliarity and 'not-knowing'. Familiar categories of acceptance did not apply to the people there, and therefore, how they may be placed within the context of 'Indian' society was a puzzle" (Pachuau 40). This may be interpreted to be a reflection of the attitude of the contemporary Indian residing in New Delhi towards the North-easterner in the twenty-first century. Taking a look back at history, during the second half of the twentieth century, immediately after independence, the Indian state must have been even more confused and puzzled in handling challenges thrown up by the uniqueness of the North-east. The pre-independence legacy left behind by the colonial Britishers in the region defied descriptions that could be neatly categorized as being Indian. All these factors determine the basis for a significant othering of the North-eastern region from mainstream India. The Indian state has as a result often approached the differences in the region with social, political, economic and military solutions that stress on uniformity with the rest of India as opposed to an appreciation for the uniqueness of the region.

> The nationalist discourse in both cases places a premium on 'unity with uniformities' and the emphasis on uniformities generates tendencies towards 'centralization'. It is from the perspective of the 'centralized' nationalist model that the peripheries are dealt with. The process of nation-building in the peripheral areas remains incomplete or rather unaddressed. (Goswami xxiii)

In other words, the challenge is in accepting what is unique and distinct about the region and consequently labelling it as alien, as such, excluding the people of the region from the definitions of Indianness in terms of physical appearance, language, culture, religion and even literature. As a result, the Northeast has come to be observed as a region occupied by marginalized minorities who do not fit into the general

description of being an Indian in relation to the nation state. The Indian nation deems the region as infested with extremist and separatist interests who go against the authority of the center whereas the people of the region consider it as an expression of their unique identity. The centre views the existence of a multiplicity of indigenous groups as a source of conflict and problems in the region. However, the noted journalist from Meghalaya, Patricia Mukhim comments:

> The modern Indian view...that the existence of different ethnic identities within the nation and the existence of systems to separate these identities are divisions which in themselves are a source of conflict and therefore ethno cultural assimilation is both desirable and inevitable. But in fact, the exact opposite is true. The point about ethno culturally divided societies is that they wish to remain divided. A Bengali or a Bihari is determined to retain and preserve his identity as is a Khasi. Each group draws the essence of its being, its group consciousness from the fact that it is different, and that it wishes to remain different. Those who see division as a source of conflict overlook this fact that conflict arises because threats to the factors which make for that division–threats to separate identity, characteristics, or even real or perceived threats to the existence of the group. (Mukhim 30-31)

K.C. Baral's "Articulating Marginality" (2013) opens up with some critical questions on whether marginality is an important feature of literature, whether there is a need to stress on the importance of the author's socio-cultural background, his/her identity? He further extends his deliberations on the distinction between great traditions and little traditions in literary articulations; which may further be discussed under the labels of national versus local. The need to recognize the significance of the local or regional cannot be overemphasized in the context of the North-east.

> The north-eastern region does have a special character of its own: the socio-cultural milieu of this region holds up in the present day, as it has done in the past, a picture that somehow distinguishes it from the rest of India. As such, this special character cannot be understood, much less assessed, in terms of the commonly accepted standards of what is believed to constitute the Indian mainstream. (Datta 119)

The questions around conflicts in the North-east, as in the state of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Manipur, are more often than not, driven by an undeniable presence of marked distinctions from mainland India. Differences persist in India's nature of composition and the oft quoted one is the north-south divide, where the north reflects the Aryan dominance and the Dravidians are representative of the south. The North-east goes beyond the idea of geographical and regional divides; there is a physiognomic difference driven by starkly different racial characteristics; often describing the populace as Mongoloid communities. These differences sometimes find even subsequent levels of resonance in the language, religion, culture, clothing, and food associated with the people of the region which stands in sharp opposition to mainland India. Edward Said's seminal contribution in his concept of orientalisms can be found quite befitting for a study of the present nature. The proposition of Said is very well established when discussing the creation and perpetuation of the notion of the Orient in ways that promotes the domination of the East by the West. Frantz Fanon in his renowned work *The Wretched of the Earth* (2001) asserts that colonialism "…is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity…" (200). In Fanon's other work of significance *Black Skins, White Masks* (2008), he brings to light the dilemma of the colonized man.

> [I] start suffering from not being a white man insofar as the white man discriminates against me; turns me into a colonized subject; robs me of any value or originality; tells me I am a parasite in the world, that I should toe the line of the white world…. (78)

Another seminal figure in the area of postcolonial thoughts is Paulo Freire who is of Brazilian origin and is renowned for the work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017). In this book he discusses how the oppressors and oppressed relationship is founded upon absolute inequality. It is a dialectical relationship where the oppressors consider it their right and privilege to define themselves as human beings while others are only things. The oppressed are described without any prior or after thought as being "violent," "barbaric," and "wicked," (30) in brief, they are depicted as being devoid of all human qualities – a process of dehumanization.

> Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. (Freire 30)

Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983) is another seminal work that talks about the mis-representation of the subaltern or marginalized groups in the Indian society. She draws one's attention to the need to examine the issues of the marginalized and subalterns by stepping into their boundaries to understand the entire situation from their perspective. To this effect, Spivak discusses the use of two different meanings of the word representation of German origin; *vetreten* and *darstellen* where the former as an act of representation means to *stand in for* where one *speaks or acts on behalf of someone or something* and the latter means *act of portrayal or to describe* while depicting *particular subject in a work of art*. Interestingly, another significant critical article relevant for the present study is J. Maggio's "'Can the Subaltern be Heard?': Political Theory, Translation, Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak" (2007). Maggio looks at Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from the perspective of a communicative role with the subaltern. He argues that the act of the subaltern speaking is only possible if the subaltern can be heard. One of his more critical assertions is that the difference embodied in different cultures needs to be appreciated and to attempt to homogenize others is problematic because "…it is presumptuous to assume that all cultures speak a similar language of 'identity'" (Maggio 421). As such, to empower the subaltern to speak in fact means to adopt an open-ended view of discourse, embracing differences, where one "…aspires to not privilege Western (or any) culture, one can attempt to understand across cultures" (Maggio 421). In other words, the subaltern can only be truly heard if there is a political will to acknowledge alternate views and accounts embedded in "disparate cultures" (Maggio 420). Taking these critical inputs into consideration and applying it to the context of the present study; one of the fundamental causes for the Indian state's inability to genuinely understand the North-east region is perhaps best reflected in the Assamese conditions of nationalism in the years leading to India's independence from the British, as put across by Sanjib Baruah, in his book *India Against Itself* (2001). The case in point brings forth, the scenario of Assamese public organizations' opposition to immigrants of Bengali descent from Sylhet to Assam in the 1930s.

> A delegation representing these organizations met Jawaharlal Nehru during his tour of Assam in 1937. Nehru's response underscores the disjuncture between the two perspectives. "The question of Sylhet's

> separation and immigration," he said, "may be very important to you but in comparison with other big problems that are facing us today, they are very small" (Baruah, *India Against* 79)

The issue of Assam having been regarded as a place of unoccupied and unused land waiting to be filled up, had created and perhaps continues to create, resentment in certain sections of the indigenous population of Assam. Nehru's input is equivalent to the Indian state's attitude towards the issues of the North-east as not being important enough; as such have been and continue to be subservient to pan-Indian interests. Moreover, regional and localized issues of the North-east are treated with a certain degree of indifference, distance and detachment. Consequently, issues of the margins and periphery are treated with an air of inferiority while those of the center occupy prominence clearly demarcating issues of the former as negligible when juxtaposed with pan-Indian concerns. This has played a major role in creating conflicts between the center and the region for which breakthrough solutions have been elusive; a vast number of these discordant engagements have sadly been reflective of violent confrontations.

James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) provides some critical perspectives on the elements of indigeneity and rootedness to the idea of one's homeland for the people groups belonging to North-east India. In referring to the North-east of India, mainland Southeast Asia mainly Myanmar, China and Bangladesh Scott's thesis uses the term Southeast Asian *masif*, to describe the vast expanse of uplands also termed as *Zomia*, which he says is one of the largest "non-state" (59) spaces in the world, if not the largest. He quotes William van Schendel who defines *Zomia* as a term used to describe highlanders common to several related Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the India-Bangladesh-Burma border area. Schendel goes on to say that *Zo* is a relational term meaning remote and as such the connotation is that of one "living in the hills" (Scott 14). The region is described by a Chinese emperor as one that has long and dangerous roads, mountains and rivers which act as great obstacles and the culture, customs and practices are different.

> Most of what the hills share as physical and social spaces marks them off fairly sharply from the more populous lowland centers. The population of the hills is far more dispersed and culturally diverse than that of the valleys. (Scott 18)

One of the most defining and distinguishing trait of *Zomia*, vis-à-vis the lowland regions is that it is relatively stateless. The population can be described as a relatively free, stateless people who are foragers and hill farmers. *Zomia* being situated at the frontiers of lowland state centers has contributed to its "relative isolation" (Scott 18) and the "autonomy" (Scott 29) such isolation favors. This dialectal relationship between the hills and plains had long existed before the British colonizers incorporated regions of *Zomia* into its imperial designs. In effect, one can make sense of the Government of India Act 1935 which during the British colonial times created the excluded areas of which the Naga Hills and Mizo Hills were a part. There was resistance to the state-making project or nation-building project that emerged especially after World War II, *Zomia* as such became a site of secessionist movements, indigenous rights struggles, regionalist agitation and armed opposition to the lowland states. This occurs as a result of the deeply felt need for the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis to protect and preserve one's way of life that was being challenged by the rise in the creation of modern nation states in the post-colonial era. As such the attempt to make some sense of the North-east reflects ideals of nationalism or national consciousness that is distinct from the broader notions of Indianness and often found to be problematic. The idea of a nation for the Naga, Mizo or Meitei is deeply associated with an ethnic identity that is essentially grounded on the elements of indigeneity and rootedness to one's own homeland. A sacred ancestral space that reflects genealogical ties to a past that constructs a nation very different from the normative idea of nation and nationalism associated with a pan Indian identity.

The nationalism and national consciousness of the Indian state is fundamentally driven by modernist trends modelled around a universalized notion of what defines Indianness excluding in the process origins, race, culture, traditions, languages and religions of minorities of the North-east. Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1983) defines a nation as "an imagined political community" (6). Partha Chatterjee in his seminal work, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993) raises a number of noteworthy points for which the work remains crucial. The first chapter titled "Whose imagined Community?" raises a very significant argument against Benedict Anderson's own influential work *Imagined Communities*. Chatterjee raises a very important point regarding Anderson's definition of how nations came into being.

> Benedict Anderson demonstrated with much subtlety and originality that nations were not the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language or race or religion; they had been, in Europe and everywhere else in the world, imagined into existence. (4)

Chatterjee then goes on to refer to the way in which Anderson goes about explaining how major institutional forms took concrete shape, especially the institution of print-capitalism in defining this imagined community; more significantly how the European model of nationalism was conceptualized by the West as a blueprint for the rest of the world.

> I have one central objection to Anderson's argument. If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? (5)

This argument is made emphatically by Chatterjee in highlighting the colonial nature of the Britishers' treatment of not only India and Indians but also towards all hitherto colonized entities of the world. Taking the North-east context into consideration, the same argument lends a credible voice to find forms of expression that are not pre-conceived and fixed in nature; that is, not predetermined by "modular" (5) forms of nationalism easily identifiable by the standard imagination of what defines an Indian. As such, the role of ethnic identity in the formation of a national consciousness or nationalism is undeniably significant especially when one looks at the study of nationalism from a position that opposes the modernist definitions. A brief glance at a modernist perspective on nationalism reveals that one assigns greater importance to the role of factors like free markets, bureaucratic state, print media, and highly evolved means of communications determining the need for nations, nationalism and national identities to be explained while factoring in the aforementioned conditions. On the other hand, primordialist definitions, in distinction to the modernists, stress on the growth of nations from a natural process of ethnic identity. In a way acknowledging the potential and essence of ethnicity in the realization of how ethnic groups and identities can provide a deeper and more meaningful understanding of nations and nationalism. Anthony D. Smith provides an account of modernist definitions of the nation being characterized by clearly demarcated territory with a center and recognized borders, a legal-political community

defined by standardized legal system, mass participation, mass public education system, political status of sovereignty and legitimation in terms of nationalist ideologies. Ethnic concepts of the nation, on the other hand, are characterized by genealogical ties, vernacular culture (notably distinctive and indigenous languages, custom and folk culture), ethno-history – narratives of the communal past as retold down the generations by the members themselves, popular mobilization – the appeal to the people as the repository of the authentic spirit of the nation. B.P. Singh in his article "North-east India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis" (1987) discusses the concept of ethnicity in the North-east of India and how "…primordial loyalties of clan, tribe and religion demanded and still receive far greater loyalty than the idea of the State" (264). Moreover, ethnic identity and genealogical nationalisms are also driven by a very strong interest in ancestral homeland, that is, a place of our own logic to define their concept of a national identity. Sanjoy Hazarika in addressing the significance of the regional North-east identity alludes,

> Here men and women, with common origins but different nationalities, share a racial, historic, anthropological and linguistic kinship with each other that is more vital than their links with the mainstream political centres, especially at Delhi, Dhaka and Rangoon. (158)

Anthony D. Smith highlights the tendencies of modernists to project nations as well as nationalisms "as a recent phenomena, the products of the process of modernization from the late eighteenth century onwards" (169). Where modernists introduce the role of ethnicity in the overall discussion about nationalism; it is with the intent to downgrade it. The more modernism's hold over the process of the nation and nationalism the weaker and weaker the ties of ethnic identity become is their argument. On the other hand, Smith further discusses how it is not possible to study nations and nationalism without factoring in the crucial impact of ethnic identity in the discourse, "…nations are formed on the basis of prior ethnic ties and networks, which provide nationalists with cultural resources for their projects of 'nation-building'" (169). Smith further refers to Walker Connor's formulation that,

> …nations are self-aware ethnic groups: they are the largest group based on a conviction of ancestral relatedness, and come into being when the majority of their members feel they belong to, and participate in, the nation. (169)

The efforts towards nation building reveals that there is significant focus on national identity – a majority group and how it stands in opposition to identity derived from ethnicity – a minority group. V. Bijukumar highlights in the article "Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India" (2013) how "most ethnic assertions" are made due to "…ethnic groups' desperate attempts to protect their identity, culture and language" (24). The insider outsider debate in the North-east of India is one that constantly rages on between the region and mainstream India. It has its historical significance well-grounded in the colonial past that has looked upon the North-east as an 'empty' land that was waiting to be discovered and claimed. Robert J. Miller discusses the doctrine of discovery used by the colonial powers which maintained that "…sovereignty over and full ownership of a territory belongs to the nation whose nationals discovered it" (122). Uditi Sen, describes the logic of terra nullius, to be "…understood as the imperial tendency to treat tribal or indigenous land as 'no one's land'…" (946), in her article "Developing Terra Nullius" (2017). Sen also discusses how the doctrine of terra nullius establishes grounds for not only justifying colonial occupation but also the justification for postcolonial endeavors of rapid development of empty and backward lands. In the latter part of the same article Sen alludes that the seemingly altruistic acts of development in the case of Andaman and Nicobar Islands saw "…the decline and disappearance of indigenous communities…" as inevitable, in fact, "…the discourse of the development there presupposed the eventual disappearance of aboriginal tribes" (953). The tribals and indigenous peoples of North-east India too have had to deal with the phenomenon of the British colonizer and the migrant outsider who intrudes upon their ancestral homelands. One of the central concerns of the North-east as a result has been the preservation and protection of one's identity from the impact of a population influx into the region. Mabel Berzin discusses how this other generates xenophobia which is "…the fear of difference embodied in persons or groups" (273). The idea of a migrant outsider, who is different: a stranger, generates the fear of being overwhelmed by people who are seen as an other. In fact the politics of the North-east is deeply influenced by the influx from people of other regions. The poetics of difference that arises out of the xenophobic fear of the migrant outsider manifests itself even in Assam the largest state of the region. Anup Shekar Chakraborty highlights that there "…is widespread apprehension in the minds of the Assamese caste Hindus that, shortly, they will lose political power in favour of

numerous migrants. The other states of the region also share the Assamese fears" (10). He further discusses the way in which the indigenous tribal population of the state of Tripura has been rendered a minority in their own land.

> Over the years, due to the migration of the Bengali Hindu population from the East Bengal, the autochthones were outnumbered. The tribal population dropped from 64 per cent in 1874 to 29 per cent in 1971. The Bengali population became 68 per cent of the total population in 1971. From all available accounts, the Bengali percentage is now 70. The result has been that political and administrative power passed from the hands of indigenous tribals to immigrant Bengalis. (10)

As such one finds that people groups in the North-east have well-grounded reasons for nurturing the fear of the migrant or stranger. It finds its basis on the need to preserve, promote, and protect one's particular identity amidst the fear of assimilation. Any act of complacency has the potential of turning into a situation where there is a complete loss of touch with one's roots and indigeneity. What happened to Tripura raises critical concerns among the native populations of other North-east states as authentic and well-grounded fears of assimilation remains a constant and real threat in the Northeast, "…the entire region has been smothered by aliens migrating from other parts of India…the native population is on the verge of being smothered" ("Fear of the Foreigner").

One of the conundrums that the Indian state is confronted with is, the exercise of building a nation, which has many diverse and disparate elements that make up its federal composition. India's heterogeneity is an undeniable reality that must be politically engaged with to resolve outstanding political challenges in regions like the North-east. While the nation-building efforts of the Indian state is based on a necessity to unite a nation, consistently challenged by regional and local voices of particularized interests, yet the voices of indigeneity need to be managed with politically viable approaches. Indiscriminate use of the policing capacity of the Indian state to resolve conflict in the region many a times runs into creation of conditions that cause deep seated resentment in the hearts of the regional and local populace.

> When the state with its all powerful authority constructs nation and wider national identity it often meets with a problem. Sometimes in this process the state imposes its will and authority on the people…while

> the state is engaging in nation-building through the construction of national identity, smaller identities move in the opposite direction, when they feel that they are about to lose their identity. (Bijukumar 27)

The preservation and protection of localized interests of the present states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur find a prominent presence in a discourse about the region as certain set of historical accounts depict the nature of interactions between the Indian state and the entities above. V. Bijukumar in his article "Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India" highlights that people groups from the Northeast drive "…to protect their peculiar identity" (27) is a major contributing factor to the voices of resistance that are found embedded in the region. These are accounts that unfortunately do not find adequate mention in the representations of the histories of the respective states in question. In the years leading to the independence of India from the colonial Britishers, the Nagas were politically conscious about the uniqueness of their identity and culture when compared to the rest of India. Due to these strongly felt apparent differences, the Naga imagination had built within it the possibility of an independent Nagaland, free of external influence and control. The Nagas could not come to terms with the yoking together of their identity and culture with an India that was starkly different, perhaps in the same way as the white colonizer's dissimilarities were overtly conspicuous to the Indian imagination. The Indian state however did not concede and treated the demand for independence with a certain level of indifference and detachment. A.Z. Phizo had along with members of the Naga National Council (NNC) had gone to meet Mahatma Gandhi leading to the months of India's independence from the British about Nagaland's aspirations of an independent status post the departure of the British. Gandhi's answer was in the affirmative and he informed the Nagas that if they wished they will be given the freedom to live as a separate country. However, the Indian state was not willing to make any space for the breaking away of the Nagas from the Indian Union through a politically driven dialogue and discourse as such NNC declared 14th August 1947, a day before the independence of India as Naga independence day. Furthermore, Phizo who headed the NNC worked his way through to meticulously disprove the Indian state's position that the Naga independence drive was just the design of a minority of ill-informed Nagas. In 1951, he wrote an important letter to the President of India mentioning that a plebiscite was going to be held to provide conclusive evidence that the Naga's

aspiration for self-determination and independence is heartfelt and as such unquestionable. In the same letter, he invited the Indian state to monitor and witness the whole process of the plebiscite. However, the results of the plebiscite was declared invalid to which A.Z. Phizo responded by putting aside constitutional measures to address Naga fight for self-determination through other means. Eventually, it progressed into an armed struggle for freedom and independence with the might of the Indian state being brought down heavily on the Nagas and tremendous losses of lives on both sides, apart from the traumatic experiences of many Naga civilians which only continues to leave resentment for the Indian state to persist in the region. Even, today, the Naga peace puzzle continues to be missing pieces, despite the Indian state's use of coercive measures and military operations to find a conclusive remedy for one of the most resilient of conflicts in the region.

The Mizos were in a rather similar dilemma about their future with an India independent of the British rule. On the eve of India's independence, Assam Congress leaders arrived at Aizawl in the year 1946 to discuss the potential futures of the Lushai Hills (now called Mizoram) post the Britishers leaving India. Opinions were varied and emotions already high about the different options laid out before the political establishments of the Lushai Hills prior to their arrival. The mood on the ground was divided; the available choices were to join the Indian union, merge with Burma (now Myanmar) or become an independent nation. In certain quarters, a fourth alternative was doing the rounds, there was unverified inputs about the possibility of the Lushai Hills becoming a crown colony post the British exit from India. The Assamese delegation made efforts to persuade the Mizos to join the Indian union; however, they provided alternatives to the Mizos in public meetings. One such public meeting, held at Kulikawn Aizawl, is recollected in a book *Hnam Kalsiam* (1996) by Biakchhunga where B.N. Rao, member of the Assamese Congress leadership, was said to have given the following option, "…the Mizo people could also choose independence if they wish" (61). On 21st February, 1947, a meeting of two hundred people from various walks of life, including prominent citizens, church workers, teachers etc. was held at Aizawl and the future of the Lushai Hills was discussed due to the impending withdrawal of the British from India. The meeting came to a resounding consensus that self-determination was the way forward and independence from India was the best option. This decision was arrived at by the members citing that Mizos are different

from Indians with respect to culture, habits, customs, language etc. as such independence should be given to the people of Lushai Hills. However, the most well-grounded political party which dominated the political scene of the Lushai Hills of the times, the Mizo Union, in a rather split decision between prominent members, was against independence citing economic grounds of inaccessibility to supplies of day-to-day needs of the people. Yet still, the very founder of the Mizo Union, R. Vanlawma, was one of the leaders who stood against the decision of the party. He was quoted to have said, "We must govern ourselves. We have enough supplies; we will be able to produce a sufficiency of things. Now is the right time to fight for independence" (Vumson 254). The decision to join India for a certain period of time was finalized by members of the Mizo Union and the majority of Mizo Union members resolved to pursue the matter of Mizo independence in the future with India. R. Vanlawma's convictions remained undeterred and in the year 1961 he became the Secretary General of the Mizo National Front (MNF) along with Laldenga as its chairman. The MNF declared independence for Mizoram in the year 1966 twenty years after the decision to join India was made. Between the years 1959 and 1966, a major localized issue of regional significance had occurred which influenced and paved way for the MNF armed struggle for freedom. This was the *mautam* famine in Mizoram begining 1959 through 1960 and the desperate call for relief to the Assam Government of the time to provide food aid to the Lushai Hills. "The appeal was dismissed by the Chaliha government. It was commonly believed that the Government of Assam was neither able to assess the intensity of impending famine nor could it rise to the occasion in dealing with it" (Thakima 352). The MNF's fight for independence was driven by a regional pitch of Indian state's negligence during the famine years and the consequences, as history was witness, was the fateful period of twenty-years of disturbance in Mizoram. The armed conflict between the MNF and the Indian state brought upon the civilian population of Mizoram a series of turbulent human rights violations by the Indian army which continues to cause serious resentments for the Indian state in the hearts of countless Mizos. This is despite the fact that Mizoram today continues to be one of the most peaceful states of the North-east.

Manipur however, had already operated as an independent Hindu kingdom prior to the arrival of the colonial Britishers. The Sanskritization of the state of Manipur, more specifically among the Meiteis of the Imphal valley had taken place in

the first quarter of the eighteenth century by the initiatives of Shanti Das Goswami who had converted Maharaja Gharib Nawaz. The Manipuri society which was a casteless society before was transformed by the initiatives of Shanti Das Goswami into a stratified Hindu society which was to become a point of contention in the future of the people. On the departure of the British on 15th August 1947, the idea and emergence of the concept of Manipuri nationalism began to gain greater and greater momentum. It was naturally assumed that once the colonial Britishers left India Manipur would regain its independence. However, the Indian state had no such intentions of allowing Manipur to function as an independent kingdom and was to treat all such entities in a standard manner. On 15th June, 1947, the Congress Party passed a resolution and declared that, "…they could not admit the right of any state in India to declare its independence to live in isolation from the rest of India" (Singh, *Revolutionary Movements* 28). In fact, the merger of the state of Manipur having taken place under duress and coercion is the way a significant section of the population recollects the circumstances, "…when the Maharaja refused to sign the agreement and when the Indian officials sought his advice, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Union Home Minister, asked the officials whether there was not a 'Brigadier' in Shillong." (Singh 29-30) According to this account, Manipur was as such merged into India on the 15th October 1949 and the circumstances under which it took place created a sense of resentment towards the undemocratic attitude of the Indian leaders. Prior to the colonial Britishers leaving India, Manipur was already facing challenges in relation to an insider versus outsider population. The Britishers had encouraged the non-Manipuri population from other parts of India to enter Manipur and carry out commercial trade practices. The Manipuri locals called them Mayangs and assigned a foreigners tag to them. Noting the general sentiments of the Manipuris, the Britishers' policy towards the so called Mayangs was one of restrictions. This was instituted in the form of a foreigners tax and also an inner line permit system where foreigners had to acquire permission from the government before entering the state of Manipur. The presence of these foreigners in the commercial and trade spaces placed the local merchants and economy at an enormous disadvantage; and after independence the removal of the foreigners tax and the inner line permit system led to an even greater level of economic, social and political disparity as the influx of people from outside the state multiplied manifolds. The efforts to politically protect the indigenous economic,

social, and cultural identity of the people of Manipur has been the leading cause for the formation of the following organizations. All these factors led to various movements for Manipuri nationalism to find its voice; especially through organized accounts of organizations like United National Liberation Front (UNLF), Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM), People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) etc. to name a few. The confrontation of Indian state with these Meitei nationalist groups have lead to massive conflict in the Imphal valley leading to a sense of resentment in the local populace towards the idea of India.

The Indian state's efforts to counter voices of indigeneity, which attempt to preserve and protect their localized identities, is more often than not promptly implemented with the use of extensive coercive military measures. The use of the power of the Indian armed forces indiscriminately against the people groups of the region, armed rebels and civilians alike, exhibits a temperament that treats them as the other or foreigner – not one of our own rationalization. A poetics of difference unfolds in the use of extraordinary forces against the people of the North-east as the region is seen as a state of exception where use of such laws can be justified and endorsed by the Indian state. Amit R. Baishya observes that the laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 have been the general trend in the administration and management of the people of the Northeast where a state of exception is created almost permanently.

> Northeastern states like Nagaland and Manipur have been administered under the ambit of such military laws almost continuously since India's independence, with states like Assam, Tripura and Mizoram also facing the brunt of such operations. (2)

The stereotypes and presuppositions of violence associated with the North-east as a result has been primarily looked upon through the lens of addressing security threats and security measures by the Indian state constantly strategizing to counter what it labels external and internal threats to the Indian nation. G. Amarjit Sharma, alludes that the Indian state's approach to the Northeast is "…partially or completely dwelled on an assumption that Northeast India is mostly about national security and policy" (xvi). In consistently engaging with the region from a security-related temperament, the Indian state has constructed a heavily militarized zone out of the

North-east. This perceived need for military and policing measures has also come at the cost of India's disconnect and detachment from its own people's general well-being in the North-east. The prompt invocation of the AFSPA 1958 in various parts of the region, to counter what the Indian state defines as rebellions has raised and continues to raise serious questions around the democratic integrity of the Indian state. These queries have often been discussed by Sanjoy Hazarika, a former Director of the Centre for Northeast Studies and Policy Research Centre, Jamia Millia University, New Delhi stressing on the need to engage with politically workable answers to determine a durable and meaningful discourse on the North-east. Such queries make an attempt to explore the possibility of alternate discursive insights into finding favourable outcomes to the many resilient conflicts of the North-east; in a way, meticulously and fervently seeking to find openings where the walls appear to be conspicuously impenetrable. However, the law and order and military approach resulting in violent coercive measures against any and every form of voice and resistance, fuels critical oversights towards ascertaining the true nature of the problems, more often than not leading to horrific and countless civilian casualties not to mention gross human rights violations.

> The basic point of the critique is that separate laws for the frontier on the ground of being 'disturbed' has never allowed for any meaningful functioning of the democratic Indian constitution. (Baruah, "An Emerging" 33)

In a critical analysis of the role of AFSPA 1958 in the North-east one comes to understand that it is an extraordinary law which unfortunately has its origins in the colonial history of India's fight for independence. It was a law that suspended the rule of law and provided extraordinary powers to the British colonizers in the violent and atrocious suppression of the popular voice of the Indian people prior to the India's independence. It was a law that was used to justify the excessive use of force, violence and shoot to kill orders against the people resisting the oppressive colonial regime of the British – civilians included. "The AFSPA is reworking of the Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance promulgated by the British in 1942 to suppress the nationalist Quit India Movement – a colonial law that has had an afterlife in post-colonial times." (Baishya 2). Baishya goes on to make a calculated observation that establishes a link

with one of the most seminal political thinkers of contemporary times Giorgio Agamben.

> My reading of the predicament of the citizens in the northeast is that they feel reduced to what…Agamben…called 'barelife'. …[I]f the AFSPA is the ban under which the sovereign power of Indian state has placed all of the northeast, then the exception to the rule of law that is spatialized in the northeast should be thought of as a camp." (39-40)

It becomes necessary to discuss how the notion of *zoé* bare life or mere life is placed in opposition to *bios* a qualified life that is a politically valued life. To borrow from Michel Foucault, what this in effect does is, it involves the biopolitical management of the people from the North-east. It categorically makes a distinction between the lives that matter versus those lives that do not have any value. By creating a camp out of the whole region or a given state, in its entirety, where there are other civilian lives present amidst what the Indian state designates as insurgent activity is highly controversial and debatable. To suspend the rule of law in its entirety for a whole population without the application of due diligence in managing a civilian population is bound to create atrocious conditions for human rights violations. The Indian army's extraordinary powers under AFSPA provides for impunity to the army for any act committed under the law creating bare lives out of the entire population of the region. The Indian state, however, claims that AFSPA allows the Indian army to operate and navigate through what is extremely hostile territory and without its extraordinary provisions it refuses to serve the security and well-being of the Indian state. Giorgio Agamben's work *State of Exception* (2003) translated by Kevin Attrell discusses how a state of exception may be created by the idea that it is for the general well-being of the people, "…suspension of law may be necessary for the common good…" (26). But here again, a poetics of difference is in play yet again, because clearly the interests of the people of the North-east is excluded from the definitions of the common good of the mainstream Indian population. The question then is whose common good are we suspending the law for? Is the North-east population of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur excluded from such a definition of the people who belong to the categorization of the "common good"? Giorgio Agamben in his other seminal book *Homer Sacer* (1995) discusses how "…every 'politicization' of life necessarily implies a new decision concerning the threshold beyond which life ceases

to be politically relevant and becomes only 'sacred life'" (139). He further stresses on describing what this sacred or bare life means, he explains that it is a "life of devoid of value" (139) or "life unworthy of being lived" (139). The sovereign power vested in the Indian state decides what kind of life is of value versus what kind of life is devoid of value. The decision to place the entire North-east under a state of exception creates conditions and perceptions that the people of the region do not even deserve to live under the provisions of the rule of law sends a rather deafening message. The Naga, Mizo and Manipuri is compelled to question whether the democratic provisions of right to life and right to equality as citizens of the Indian state is a provision only for a certain category of Indian citizens. What are the attributes that qualify as the mandatory criteria to decide whose life is politically relevant and is worthy of being considered under the definition of the Indian state's *bios*.

In continuing to establish relevant theoretical frameworks for the present study; the significance of critically analyzing the lived-experiences of the people of Northeast is determined to be indispensable. This has its basis on the fact that many of the emerging literary figures from the region are just beginning to be recognized, as legitimate representative voices, who are making some inroads into the larger arena of the Indian literary space by articulating the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri identities. In fact, the three chosen writers for this research initiative, are all important and prominent personalities in the field of English literature of their respective states, as such in their own rights, may be considered articulate representative voices of the communities that they belong to. In other words, they have made highly critical contributions towards making the lived-experiences and identities of the people of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, gain a considerable level of visibility through their respective literary endeavors. The rationalistic and scientific approach to the study of philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century was found to have fallen short of being able to address the impasse between the real and the ideal. The philosophical branch of phenomenology, as such, is ascertained to be one of the more relevant approaches as it lends due importance to the area of first-person experiences; especially a reading of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. It is important to recognize that the discipline of phenomenology is very broad and extensive and discussions in this study will remain focused on select concepts that are found to have immediate and direct bearings on this research. In *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1983)

he discusses how things are seen "…we can observe their essence, their constitution, their intrinsic character, and we can make our speech conform in a pure measure to what is "seen" in its full clarity" (Husserl *The Idea* 24). Schmitt, in assessing the conditions under which the study of phenomenology emerged as an alternative form of philosophical enquiry, of which, Husserl was a forerunner, highlights.

> We, begin, then, by questioning what we had previously taken for granted, or by wondering at what seems most familiar. This involves a change of attitude; we must look at the world with "new eyes". (238-39)

According to Husserl, in order to look at life with "new eyes" necessitates one to return to the "things themselves" (Zahavi 17). Dan Zahavi, when referring to Husserl stresses on this going back to the things themselves in the following manner, "…if we are to examine in a nonprejudicial manner what ideality or reality is, we need to pay attention to its experiential givenness" (12). There is a significant focus on approaching things in a novel and different way; a departure from the rationalistic perspective to a subjectivist one. In this process of attempting to define the what is from a first-person experience, there is a need to go back to the things themselves and Husserl's focus is on the role of the conscious; an analysis of what consciousness implies. In other words, one needs to engage in the act of pure description of the what is, "…for how things appear is an integral-part of what they really are." (Zahavi 61). Zahavi once again discusses Husserl's notion of consciousness and its role in the constitution of experience.

> In the analysis of the structure of experience, Husserl pays particular attention to a group of experiences that are all characterized by being conscious of something, that is, which all possess an object-directedness. This attribute is also called *intentionality*. One does not merely love, fear, see, or judge, one loves a beloved, fears something fearful, sees an object and judges a state of affairs. (14)

Husserl informs us that one may be involved in the act of perception, judgement, fantasy doubt, expectations, thought etc. all these different forms of consciousness are intended towards something; that is, their related objects that the consciousness or intention is directed towards. Through this, one comes to understand that, in order for a phenomenological study to occur, the role of a conscious act towards

an object is a must. And that conscious directedness of one's efforts towards a given object needs a condition of "presuppositionlessness" (Zahavi 44) to effectively take place; leading to a first-person experience that is not overwhelmed by preconceived notions. William Barrett in his book *Irrational Man* (1990) further affirms that for Husserl phenomenology was "…a discipline that attempts to describe what is given to us in experience without obscuring preconceptions or hypothetical speculations" (179). In *The Idea of Phenomenology* Husserl alludes to what a study phenomenology entails, "…pure phenomenon of relation, corroboration, justification of the meaning of validity, for its part, comes to absolute givenness" (36).

Husserl also refers to the deep-rooted assumptions of life and their impact and influence on the way one views the world from the vantage point of the "natural attitude" (Zahavi 51). He emphatically stresses on the need to "bracket" (Zahavi 62) or "suspend" (Zahavi 51) such forms of pre-learned knowledge about the world as its presence could lead to a distortion of the knowledge acquired from application of the phenomenological lived-experience of day-to-day events. Merleau-Ponty highlights this aspect of Husserl's conceptual thought process in the following manner, "Our relation to the world is so profound and so intimate that the only way for us to notice it is to suspend its movement, to refuse our complicity or to render it inoperative" (64). The result of bracketing or suspension of the natural attitude is also termed as "epoché" (Zahavi 45) by Husserl. Epoché then allows for the consciousness of our experience or reality of things to be constituted as it unfolds before us. The alternative to the natural attitude is the "phenomenological attitude" (Zahavi 51) which sets aside the prejudices of the natural attitude. And Zahavi further talks about how Husserl insists that it is unacceptable philosophically to take the validity of an assumption for granted no matter how obvious and natural it might seem, as such enabling an understanding of the role of epoché in bringing this about.

> [E]poché entails a change of attitude toward reality, and not an exclusion of reality. It is only through such a suspension that we will be able to approach reality in a way that will allow for a disclosure of its true sense. (45)

Zahavi is apprehensive of the fact that there is a tendency to misunderstand the reason behind Husserl's intention in coming up with the notion of epoché. To clarify any potential misconceptions that may arise, he asserts that,

> We do not effect it in order to deny, doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from our research, but simply in order to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic attitude toward reality, that is, in order to be able to focus more narrowly and directly on the phenomenological given – the objects as they appear. (45)

Another interesting and significant aspect of Husserl's concept on phenomenology is the perspectival nature of the way in which one directs attention towards an experience or object. The way an object appears to the subject from a given position is bound to be partial and incomplete; as one can only see a given object from a particular direction. Zahavi provides an insight into the nature of Husserl's thoughts on the role of perspectives in relation to phenomenological thinking, in the following manner.

> Whereas objects appear perspectivally – never given in their totality, but always certain limited profile – this is not true for the self-appearance of consciousness. Whereas the object is given perspectivally, partially, and inadequately, and whereas it necessary to run through an entire series of profiles in order to get an approximate presentation of the entire object, the experience itself appears immediately in its totality. (47)

This perspectival incompleteness of one's conscious viewpoint of a phenomenon or object can potentially be harmful because incompleteness remains in the limited act of perception alone; however the experience acquired is complete and instant and as such could lead to a distorted understanding of the object or experience. This creates the necessity for one to be able to look at things from multiple angles, perspectives and signs so as to freely gain a more comprehensive and well-rounded perception of the experience; not limiting oneself to linear-perspective viewpoint.

Another significant area of study in relation to Husserl's inputs is the concept of "phenomenological reduction" (Zahavi 57). Epoché it has been established contributes to the mind being freed of all pre-conceived notions, prejudgements and perceptions; allowing one to seeing things as themselves as they appear. What then phenomenological reduction does is it enables the subject to take up the task on describing through language, just what one sees, in not only the external object but also the internal act of consciousness; the experience. The focus becomes the

experience and the challenge then is the task of coming up with a detailed description of the nature and quality of experience. The process becomes a tedious one, wherein, one looks and describes, relooks and describes, looks again and describes presenting the variations in the descriptions of a number of qualities. Back to the things themselves in the process and act of descriptions where the entirety of the experience is made available to the conscious. Each and every new angle contributing to the body knowledge and broadening of the understanding of a given phenomenon. So, it is phenomenological because everything in the world becomes a phenomena and reduction because it directs one back to understand one's own experience of the way things are. Schmitt, in referring to Husserl's choice of terminology says,

> …it is called "phenomenological" because it transforms the world into a mere phenomenon. It is called "reduction" because it leads us back to the source of the meaning and existence of the experienced world, in so far as it is experienced, by uncovering intentionality. (240)

Husserl's discussions around the first-person experience and the setting aside of preconceived notions of the natural attitude to set epoché in motion leading into a phenomenological reduction, ultimately is to arrive at the essence of the perceived object or phenomenon. The determination of the essence of the subjective experience, Husserl highlights, is made possible through "eidetic reduction" (Zahavi 44); that is, the subjective experience may direct one to a number of essential structures that enable a given object to arrive at those characteristics which cannot be dismissed as being nonessential to that given object. An attempt to establish through eidetic reduction the most critical and essential nature of the objects in question that ultimately determines what is given to us in that experience.

> [A]llows us to distinguish between the accidental properties of the object, that is, the invariant structures that make the object into the type of object it is,…. In that case, I will have succeeded in disclosing the invariant structures that make up its essence. (Zahavi 39)

The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl provides us with an input into the importance of lived-experiences through Kire's "people stories" (Daftuar "For Easterine), Jacob's "real people" (Sarangi 4) and Ngangom's "poetry of witness" (Ngangom 300) in the literary space of the North-east. The efforts to arrive at the very essence or true sense of a phenomena Husserl directs our attention towards the need

to look at life anew from a vantage point that is not influenced by presuppositions – a first person experience of the reality as it is. He continues to allude that a condition of presuppositionlessness is only made possible through what he calls the act of bracketing or suspension of the natural attitude or his concept of epoché. Epoche by suspending or bracketing the prejudices and presuppositions associated with the natural attitude does not attempt to deny the salience of reality but a change in the attitude to reality. In other words, this bracketing or suspension of the natural way of doing things is not to ignore reality but directed towards a certain dogmatic attitude towards the phenomenological given so that the objects can be studied as they are. Through the phenomenological approach, the attempt in effect, is to derive an essentialist, positivist and foundationalist understanding of the enquiry into the truth of a given phenomenon or object – in this case the experience and identity of a people group.

The essentialist, positivist and foundationalist perspective on identity is rooted in a fixed set of common characteristics or experiences among members of an identity group. This conception of group identity often underlies a broader interpretative framework. While oppressed individuals are afforded a degree of agency in interpreting their experiences, as their individual experiences or traits form the basis of their group membership, this agency is constrained by the notion that, in pertinent respects, all members of the group are alike or share some inherent essence defining the group. This imposed uniformity of experience implies that while an individual can interpret and derive knowledge from their own experiences, other members of the group also possess the authority to interpret those same experiences. Furthermore, both the experiences and interpretations thereof are seen as representative of all others within the group. Sharing an identity entails sharing the interpretative framework used to understand one's experiences. Consequently, one's comprehension of one's experiences is subject to the group's collective understanding, with only shared experiences among group members being given prominence.

When the essentialized, positivist and foundationalist notions of identity and experience are evoked between two entities there is bound to be an impasse – a deadlock. The essentialized, positivist and foundationalist attributes of the mainstream Indian cultural identity and experience will naturally focus on the salience of the Indian race – Aryan or Dravidian whereas the Mongoloid phenotype of the Nagas,

Mizos and Meiteis will stand it in stiff opposition to attributes that bear stark racial differences. This oppositional element embedded in the essentialized, positivist and foundationalist perspectives on identity and experience manifests itself in other varied ways. The privileging of certain norms and values associated with one's cultural identity as opposed to the rejection or dismissal of other's norms and values; this maybe one's cultural norms, behavioral norms, norms of conduct, vernacular language, or even religious orientation. The juxtaposition of the attributes of Indianness as opposed to the regional identities of the North-easterner manifested in the Naga, Mizo or Meitei way of life. This dialectical and oppositional stance between the mainstream of India and the North-east unfortunately continues to sustain critical points of conflict between the two. However, postmodernist concepts of identity unveil that cultural identity is a constantly evolving, changing, unstable and an unpredictable phenomenon.

> Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think. Instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity' lays claim. (Hall 222)

Hall's inputs direct one's thoughts to the flexibility and negotiability of identity. It not only questions the legitimacy of essentialist, positivist and foundationalist claims around the very concept of identity but allows for a poetics of difference to gain significance. Clearly, the imposition of canonical views of identity and experience through the speaking subject marginalizes, discriminates and excludes other voices of difference in the process problematizing the cultural identity of minority groups.

> It involves the exclusion or marginalization of other possible subject positions and other meanings. Whereas much canonical British speaks as if it were addressing the individual, the values it represents most often position its narrator and reader as implicitly white. The effect of this can be to marginalize non-white readers whose experiences are likely to be very different from the assumed norm. (Weedon 62)

The need to recognize the legitimacy of norms and values that are different and distinct from a particular grand narrative, whether Eurocentric or Indo-centric, is what the postmodernist thoughts enable. It provides for a platform that allows for differences and distinctiveness in identity and the resulting experiences to claim one's own identity questioning the very notions of fixedness and homogeneity. This postmodernist stance makes allowance for a minority cultural identity to operate in a space that is different and distinct from the majoritarian cultural identity's pronounced and overwhelming presence. A shared space where the dominant culture seeks to impose its ideas of acceptable norms and values on the other – in an attempt to homogenize and integrate the minority culture. As such, the postmodernist thought lays emphasis on providing legitimacy to the specificities and particularities that are an integral part of one's cultural identity and experience. Minority cultural identities consequently strive to find ways to protect, preserve and promote attributes that are associated with their local and regional way of life by articulating their subject position. In the case of cultural minorities of the people groups of the North-east the stress very frequently is on the indigeneity and roots of difference and distinctiveness embedded in their ancestral heritage. In other words, the aforementioned efforts related to identity may be interpreted "…as advocating for recognition of and respect for their cultural difference, which derive from distinct group identities" (Bernstein 50). On the other hand, the efforts on part of marginalized communities to articulate differences as a legitimate exercise in challenging voices of exclusion and discrimination is often referred to as politics of identity. Minority cultural identities that consistently attempt to claim differences and distinctiveness are often labelled as that of identity politics – assigned a negative connotation by majoritarian cultures. Bernstein also alludes to the challenges around the invocation of differences and distinctiveness and how identity politics "… inhibit the development of national citizenship by fostering a commitment to the solidarity of subgroups and thus antithetical to the health of the welfare state" (52). A type of politics that focuses on the pursuit of narrow identity-based interests without accommodating the general good of the people at large or that of the larger nation. In effect, identity politics in all its negative connotations, is projected to act as an impediment to any given nation building exercise because it reiterates on the salience of differences. Critics assert that the repeated emphasis of claims of differences and distinctiveness by minority cultural

identities create schisms between people groups as a result leading to a balkanizing effect compromising the interests of the nation as a whole or even that of humanity.

> Several have advocated the abandonment of the whole enterprise of determining who belongs to what racial group or what that belonging might mean to the lives of group members; they argue that paying attention to racial identities will unnecessarily balkanize our society and obscure the ways in which we are all universally human. (Moya, *Learning from* 5)

The proponent of the above views place great importance on the nation-building priorities of a given nation, in this case the Indian nation, as such assimilation is considered desirable. If not assimilation, at least, an imposition of homogenized set of social, cultural and political norms and values, in the process diluting those norms and values associated with the specificities and particularities of minority groups – such as those of the Nagas, Mizos or Meiteis. Postmodernism in the process of enabling difference including perspectives paradoxically generates platforms to further enable discussions on how assimilation to a majoritarian culture and identity are not beyond the scope of its theoretical provisions. Within the discussions of a postmodernist framework, both cultural identities of the majority and minority are equally evolving, negotiable, unstable, unpredictable and constantly in the act of production as such are founded upon subjective principles of how cultural identities can be constantly formed anew to adapt to ever-changing fluid conditions of life. The open-endedness of the postmodernist thought allows for a legitimate space to question the very poetics of differences by which the essentialisms related to the Indian grand narrative are deconstructed to privilege the essentialisms of the little narratives of the North-east. In effect, the postmodernist argument ironically creates a convergence between the opposing stances of the essentialisms between mainstream Indian identity and the identity of the Nagas, Mizos or the Meiteis. However, to stress on the poetics of difference once again, Dominick La Capra in his article “Experience and Identity” (2006) stresses on how identity,

> …should be neither idealized as always beneficient nor demonized and seen as a source of the political ills of the modern world. Nor should it be conflated with identification in the sense of total fusion with others

> wherein difference is obliterated and criticism is tantamount to betrayal. (228)

Paula M.L. Moya in her book, *Learning from Experience* (2002) carries out an analysis of cultural particularity versus universal humanity from the perspective of identity and experience. A politics of identity where an attempt to totally infuse with another culture in the narrative of Richard Rodriguez to the mainstream American society was initiated with a great optimism on part of Rodriguez himself. Rodriguez, as the name suggests, is of Hispanic racial origins and belongs to the Mexican American community. In his book, *Hunger of Memory* (1983), Rodriguez strongly suggests that those minorities who assimilate to the mainstream American culture can do so because one's social identity is merely a matter of the mind. Moya alludes to Rodriguez's assertions in her book that by "changing his mind…he can change his identity – and the social world to which his identity refers" (120). However, Moya questions Rodriguez's idealistic postmodernist concept of identity by which he conforms to the view "not by blood but by choice" (Haraway 196) argument of choosing to be a part of the mainstream cultural American identity. In effect, the assumption is that by choosing to conform to the ways of the majoritarian culture one can alter and become totally infused. Moya goes on further to state that Rodriguez denies some critical aspects of his identity that is embedded in the reality of his social, political, and epistemic location of his identity. The attempt on part of Rodriguez to sever connections with his identity and social categories like race is recognized to be highly ambitious as his racial difference from the white American is conspicuously undeniable. Moya asserts that it has become evident that "…his assimilation into white American society was not as successful as he had claimed it to be" (140).

In the above instance of Rodriguez's attempt to successfully assimilate into the mainstream American society by "changing his mind" (Moya, *Learning from* 120) and see himself as deracinated from his Hispanic minoritized identity remains problematic. This establishes the view that question or reality about changing one's identity is more than just about changing one's mind or about how one decides to see himself. Moya denotes that the collective racial identity of a people group will not act in an antithetical nature to the identity of the individual in fact they are dependent on each other. "This is because all identities, including racial ones, are inescapably relational: to know ourselves as *selves* requires us to know ourselves in relation to *others*" (110).

What in effect happens is one then describes himself or herself as beings with shared recognizable human attributes – attributes that are shared with some while lacking in attributes with others. This leads one to focus attention on how certain problems of identity may continue to remain unresolved and at loggerheads because of oppositional views about the concept of identity itself. The two prevailing alternative perspectives on cultural identity, one aligned with identity often labelled as essentialism and the other rooted in postmodernism, are perceived as offering conflicting interpretations of identity due to their differing understandings of the relationship between the experiences of individuals within society and the conceptual framework of identity. Basically, the essentialist standpoint asserts that the identity shared among members of a social group remains stable and largely unchanged, as it is founded on their shared experiences. Critics of essentialism argue that this perspective overlooks historical shifts and disregards internal variations within a group, instead favoring only the experiences that are universally shared. Postmodernists, in particular, contend that identities are constructed rather than naturally derived from experience, this becomes problematic, as they argue that experience cannot serve as a basis for objective knowledge.

Satya P. Mohanty explains why the postmodernist argument rejects experience as a legitimate source of objective knowledge on identity. The very constructed nature of experience depicts that there is no guarantee that any one experience will lead one person to a set of common value or beliefs which will in turn link the said person to every other member of a cultural identity group. As such experience is unstable and unreliable and cannot be a considered a source of objective knowledge. Mohanty then asks whether it is of any value to enquire into the cognitive component of personal experience with the hope of gleaning some objective knowledge from it. The postmodernist's response to this question, rather oddly, Mohanty highlights is a disguised form of foundationalism, "…for it remains within a specifically positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge" (36). Postmodernism assumes that the only kind of objective knowledge that is legitimate is one that is independent of theoretical presuppositions and it concludes that theory dependence of experience is evidence that it will always be epistemically suspect. However, Mohanty's stress on the significance of the cognitive component in the acquisition of objective knowledge is perhaps best

highlighted by Paula M.L. Moya in her article "Postmodernism, "Realism" and the Politics of Identity".

> Experiences are not wholly external events; they do not just happen. Experiences happen to us, and it is our theoretically mediated interpretation of an event that makes is an "experience." The meanings we give our experience are inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and "theories" through which we view the world. But the crucial claim in my argument is not that experience is theoretically mediated but rather that experience *in its mediated form* contains a "cognitive component" through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world. (81)

Thus, the postpositivist realist position that is put forward by Mohanty attempts to provide a legitimacy to experience as a source of objective knowledge. He asserts that all experience may be considered "…socially constructed, but the constructedness does not make it arbitrary or unstable in advance." (38) Moya explains that reality from the perspective of realists in a given area is to believe in the existence of a reality that is, in part, independent of human's mental ability to construct it. As such "…when realists say that something is "real," they do not mean that it is not socially constructed; rather, their point is that it is not *only* socially constructed." (Moya, *Learning from* 27) She goes on to highlight that,

> By seeing experience as theory mediated, realists understand that it can be a source of real knowledge as well as of social mystification; by seeing experience as causally related to the (social and natural) world, realists provide a way to evaluate the reliability of the knowledge humans have gained from their experiences. (27-8)

Michael R. Hames-García in his article "Who Are Our Own People?" (2002) denotes that postpositivist realism does not make claims of one having unmediated knowledge but rather through the act of interpretation and theory mediation of the world, "…one can more or less accurately grasp the complexity of the social process and multiple conditioning that make up the "truth" of experience" (109). In the light of the above points of discussion, claims of the postpositivist realist theory of identity relevant to the present study are highlighted as follows:

Firstly, the different social categories such as race, culture, religion etc. that together constitute an individual's social location will be causally related to the experiences that the individual will have. Secondly, a postpositivist realist theory of identity claims that there is a cognitive component to identity which allows for the space for error and accuracy in interpreting one's experiences. Theory mediated experience is characterized by the possibility of revision to one's understanding of a given situation over a period of time thereby enabling the possibility of subsequent interpretations of the same situation more or less accurate. Thirdly, a postpositivist realist theory of identity is that oppositional struggle is fundamental to our ability to understand the world more accurately. The alternative constructions and accounts referred to above are generated through oppositional struggle and make provisions for new ways of looking at the world around us. They often present a more nuanced picture and often question dominant concepts of what is "right", "true" or "beautiful" (Moya, *Learning from* 44). Moya in her article "Postmodernism, "Realism" and the Politics of Identity" alludes to how the well-being and sometimes even the survival of the groups or individuals "…who engage in oppositional struggle depends on their ability to refute or dismantle dominant ideologies…" and they call into account "…distorted representations of peoples, ideas, and practices whose subjugation is fundamental to the colonial, neocolonial, imperial and capitalist project" (86). Mohanty's inputs highlight that it is important here to acknowledge that from a postpositivist realist position one realizes that "identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways. It is in this sense that they are valuable, and their epistemic status should be taken seriously" (43).

To conclude, this chapter plays a critical role in providing the tone for the entire thesis as the poetics of difference that plays out dialectically between the Indian state and the region needs to be engaged with critically. The present chapter in effect is the literature review of all relevant theoretical considerations needed to generate a grounding for the research initiative. It lays the ground for enquiring into the question of the marginalization of the North-east of India vis-à-vis mainstream Indian society and how differences play a salient role in the interactions between the said regions. The chapter focuses on highlighting differences ranging from race, culture, language, location and religion and how subsequently differences manifest themselves in the literary traditions emanating from the North-east. In other words, it establishes that the

literature from North-east is more often than not juxtaposed in oppositional modes of engagement with the Indian literary canon from which it is excluded. Marginalization is defined by Merriam Webster's online dictionary as "to relegate to an unimportant position within a society or group" and to partially quote Pelc who states that marginalization of peripheries occur as a result of "…the process of putting them in such position…" (13) The position of being placed at the margins of the Indian state is definitive of the North-east Indian experience and identity. The who of the North-east Indian is persistently questioned because the Naga, Mizo or the Meitei identity does not represent the standard and accepted idea of Indianness. The chapter engages with how the Indian grand narrative is questioned for its normative essentialist, positivist and foundationalist stance of the concept of India. To this effect, the structures of grand narratives are critically discussed against the difference including perspectives of poststructuralism, postcolonialism and postmodernism. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's "Can the Subalterns Speak?" is a seminal work that further help establish the salience of how ability for the subaltern to speak is critically dependent on representations of the other's reality within the ambit of the study. It also attempts to establish the theoretical relevance of the disciplines of biopolitics of Foucault and Agamben and first-person and lived experiences in relation to Husserl's phenomenology for the present study. Moreover, the chapter attempts to lay grounds for engaging with the notion that the homogeneity and uniformity with which the North-east region is approached does not respectfully engage with the 'reality' of the region. J. Maggio's take on Spivak's famous essay where he stresses on the significance of appreciating the reality that cultural disparities exist. And that to enable the subaltern to speak translates into the need, on part of the dominant community, to restrain from homogenizing the other into the cultural norms of the self. Within the context of this study, realities that are considered to be different and distinct from the mainstream Indian society which contribute to experiences and identity questioning the standardized notion of pan-Indian sameness. To this end, theoretical considerations from postpositivist reality are explored to help establish the need to find objectivity and truth in both the socially constructed experiences and the reality of experiences embedded in the geographical and social location of the North-east – specifically those of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

In the following chapter, the dialectically opposed exterior's gaze of mainstream India and the self's interior recognition of the people of the North-east of India are deliberated upon. The external gaze of the Indian state is believed to be founded upon the essentialist, positivist and foundationalist concepts of what defines the concepts around India and Indianness. In the process marginalizing the North-east as ideas of Naganess, Mizoness or Meiteiness are rendered alien to India's definition of the self. It is through this normative grand Indian narrative that the peripheral regions of the North-east are dealt with. As such the chapter attempts to break down the constructed stereotypes and presuppositions about the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis through an in depth analysis of their experiences. The chapter grounds its theoretical considerations on the poststructural, postcolonial and postmodern perspectives to explore ways to articulate the self's interior recognition of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei. It further engages with the concept of biopolitics of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. More specifically the notions around Agamben's state of exception, his categorization of life into *bios* and *zoé* and the consequent significance of these concepts on the lives and experiences of the people of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur.

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CHAPTER III

Exterior's Gaze and Interior's Self Recognition

This chapter predominantly attempts to deconstruct and delve into the narratives that influence external factors shaping the perception and representation of the North-east through specific epistemological lenses. It also delves into how the external gaze influences and creates identity consciousness in communities such as the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. The chapter also discusses the period before India gained independence and how the colonial British portrayed themselves as superior to the native Indians. The British exercised their authority to enforce Western norms and values on the subcontinent while also discriminating against the indigenous aspects of the culture and customs of the native population. They otherized the natives, failing to recognize and respect their differences. This recurrent denial of acknowledging differences also manifests itself in the relationship between postcolonial India and its North-east as the Indian state attempts to homogenize the region into a monocultural integrationist narrative – the Indo-centric narrative. The Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis due to a poetics of difference recognized themselves as a self-determined entity unto themselves prior to the colonial British period, during the colonial period and post the departure of the British from India. During the pre-colonial era as non-state spaces – the people groups are characterized as those who deliberately chose to escape from the state making projects of other nations around them. The modular forms of nationalism, the Western and Indo-centric, both excluded the existence of a reality of sense of peoplehood specific to the Naga, Mizo or Meitei imagination in the North-east. The Mizo, Naga or Meitei imagined communities were governed by a primordial sense of self which is deeply embedded in the roots of their social, geographical and historical locations. The inability of the Indian state to accommodate this disparate notion of the Mizo, Naga or Meitei self led to conflicts which were to be characterized by armed violence. As a result, the Indian state's exterior gaze upon the region is reflective of a certain exceptionality and how this creates a state of exception where the rule of law is undone. A state of exception where extraordinary laws like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFPSA) 1958 is invoked to reduce the conflict of region to a law and order problem which utterly fails to respect the presence of disparate modes of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei world views. As such, the self's interior recognition resists the efforts to homogenize and assimilate the North-east into the fold

of the Indian grand narrative without extending due to sensitivity towards the differences embedded in the indigeneity of the region. The select novels and poems articulate and become representative voices of the people of the North-east who question stereotypical constructs that have been imposed upon the region. It reveals the oppositional forces at play of the essentialist, positivist, and foundationalist claims of identity between both the centre and the North-east region. How tensions arise from the conflict between the fixed idea of India or Indianness and the excluded physiongomical characteristics or particular ways of life of Naga, Mizo, or Manipuri identity, unfortunately, highlighting a recurring impasse.

The history of colonization of a significant section of the world's population by the European colonizers initiated forced cartographic reorganization of territories and deeply scarred the psyche of many of today's developing nations, the Indian nation included. All this is amidst, claims of the West's altruistic civilizing mission of the diverse world populations that were determined to be in need of upliftment, development and enlightenment. While the advancement of the West did contribute to the modernization of many colonized peoples, across the world, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized on very rare occasions was one interpreted to be benevolent by the native. In the Indian scenario, a major part of the country's population organized themselves around the experience of being discriminated, exploited, oppressed and dehumanized. Freire, draws one's attention to the fact that dehumanization is the "…result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors" (18). Sanjib Baruah addresses the need to free ourselves from the colonial way of the seeing because it subverts the local social and cultural dynamics to the detriment of the colonized.

> The colonial spatial order involved the radical subversion of existing social, political and economic networks and property regimes. It is vitally important to free ourselves from the colonial way of seeing, and to take stock of the local cultural dynamics and practices of space, recognizing the violent break in spatial dynamics that colonial rule represents. (16)

Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism* (1979) is referred to by Joy L.K. Pachuau in her own formative book *Being Mizo* (2014), to make explicit the West's exterior gaze in the "…creation and perpetuation of the idea of an 'Orient'" (35).

Pachuau suggests that Said's contributions aid in a more comprehensive understanding of how the West creates this notion of "… 'otherness', with the end of domination and subjugation, the West reified itself as rational and hence superior" (35). As such, a number of postcolonial studies examine and analyse the Westerner's gaze on people groups and indigenous lands as being foregrounded by a sense of superiority and bravado that overwhelmed and consumed what was considered savage, barbaric, uncivilized, and abnormal. The British, who were representative of the West in the context of India, saw Indian civilization as a racial other which depicted differences from the concepts, norms and values of the West. "The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values" (Fanon 32). There was in the Britisher an anxiety for the difference that was placed before it, a mental and emotional uneasiness, a disorientation, and discomfort caused by the perception of difference. This mental and emotional uneasiness stemmed from the need to have all things systematically ironed out and from the relative comfort provided by homogenous ideas, beliefs and identity. Integral elements of racial, linguistic and cultural differences associated with the Indian way of life were isolated and placed in the West's own conceptual categories – categories that were formulated for the brown and backward Indian by a white and progressive race. This categorization places and privileges the Western gaze and enables it to declare itself as the universal norm to be emulated by the lesser and inferior peoples of India (Malhotra 25).

The natives of India were, as were other colonized peoples, relegated to positions of inferiority which made them not quite human in the eyes of the Westerners, i.e., dehumanized. To describe it more succinctly, Indians were placed in a position of utter and absolute difference and they could only gain any semblance of value through, and only through what the British established as norms of progression for the colonized. And these norms of advancement and progress were externally constructed and imposed upon the colonized and were essentially aligned to an imitation of the norms endearingly affiliated to the colonizers' own framework of aesthetics. One's attention here is directed towards the concepts of biopolitics which was initially drawn up by Michel Foucault and then developed further by Agamben in his seminal work *Homo Sacer* (2003). In the aforementioned book, Agamben conceptualizes a biopolitical human condition which segregates the quality of life

between that of *bios* and *zoé*. This differentiation is clearly defined by the dialectics built within the two terms, *bios* – a life that is of political value and *zoé* – one that is associated with bare life. He elaborates that bare life or *zoé* is a natural life but life which is of value is *bios* "…not at all simple natural life but rather a qualified life, a particular way of life" (Agamben 1). This particular way of life is a way of life attuned and structured to the privileging of the colonizer's interests. It exemplifies the dominant nature of the colonizer's position in determining a way of life that is coherent with the overall philosophy of the West, as a result, rendering inconsequential the native's own social, cultural, political and economic heritage. Ania Loomba in *Colonialism, Postcolonialism* (1998) quotes Macaulay where he is quoted to have said "…a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect," (Loomba 146) succinctly depicts a dismissive attitude towards the native Indian's own elements of indigeneity.

> [W]estern ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. It is an approach to indigenous peoples which still conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of indigenous peoples – spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically. (Smith 63)

The colonized Indians were determined to be in need of colonial tutelage, needing to be brought up the ladder of civilization, in other words, the exigency to train them to rule themselves. What also began to unfold in this historical colonizer-colonized relationship of goodwill was a justification for the pursuit of one's own self-interest as long as it could be depicted and claimed in the name of some higher purpose. "Such Indians are grateful to the colonialists for having given them a sense of history, which they are programmed to believe they lacked prior to Western rule" (Malhotra 324). In this notion of colonial goodwill was embedded an implicit justification for the exercise of colonial violence like the father possessing the right to discipline a son or a daughter. A child that strays away from the will of the father for his or her own good rightfully warrants and attracts disciplinary action because within that hierarchy the father knows best. "The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's views of itself as the center of legitimate

knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of civilized knowledge" (Smith 72). As a consequence of the oppressive colonial regime's treatment of the colonized, a stereotypical and distorted representation of the Indian race as inherently superstitious, uncivilized, chaotic and barbaric was projected. Malhotra asserts that even contemporary views of India by the West determines it "…as a bundle of the old and the new, accidently and uncomfortably pieced together, an artificial construct without a natural unity…" (4). The foundational thoughts surrounding the concept of nationalism were not spared either, the West was to provide a model for every possible area of knowledge. Partha Chatterjee highlights that Benedict Anderson in his seminal book *Imagined Communities* (1983) came up with a subtle and original claim that "…nations were not the determinate products of given sociological conditions such as language or race or religion; they had been in Europe and everywhere else in the world imagined into existence" (4). Chatterjee goes on to protest and object to the West's modular forms of nationalism, a definition of nationalism that is scripted by Europe in a way that it had already scripted the colonialism, anti-colonialism and postcolonialism of peoples that it had colonized the world over. Anti-colonialism and postcolonialism in India, as was comparable in other parts of the colonized world, was driven by a nationalism that was essentially different. It was often founded upon and inspired by differences and distinctions of genealogy, race, ethnicity, culture, traditions, language, religion etc.; fertile grounds for imagining a nation different from the colonizer's oppressive regime. The West appears to show no remorse at all, if given the opportunity the colonized mind and its ability to imagine would also remain under constant siege, "…even our imaginations must remain forever colonized" (Chatterjee 5). Freire expounds that the oppressor's excessive and overwhelming desire to control another is "necrophilic" (50) and is "nourished by a love of death, not life" (50). To put it differently the West's gaze does not allow the colonized Indian to grow and develop in life, it forces the oppressed native to remain fixed within confines of a mechanically determined way of life – a stillness or lifelessness imitative of death. Freire's reference to this mechanistic determination of the oppressed native's world can also be interpreted as a life of "prescription" (21). Any form of prescription implicitly assigns a restriction to the exercising of both the imagination and freedom to imagine on the oppressed's consciousness. "Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another,

transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (21). The West's exterior gaze in its attempt to dismiss the legitimacy of differences that suppress all forms of inherent uniqueness in the colonized native's identity attempts to homogenize the colonized within its universalism. In that effort, the oppressed native's race, language, culture, traditions, religion and origins are rendered frivolous and extraneous; and a narrative is formulated and constructed to accord stereotypical representations that silence the authentic voices of indigeneity. As such, the reality surrounding the colonized Indians were enmeshed with selective and prescribed representations that align with the British colonizer's self-interests. In other words, the exterior gaze associated with the Britisher's refusal to respect differences was the main factor behind the discrimination, exclusion, mis-representation, abnormalization and marginalization of colonized native Indians.

Both the colonial exterior gaze from the West and pre-colonial and postcolonial exterior gaze from the Indian state engenders a rather unique set of conditions and experiences for the people groups from the North-east of India. Samrat Choudhury draws one's attention to the way in which the Aryans or Aryavarta looked upon the people groups of Mongoloid origins as Kiratas comparable to wild beasts. Choudhury quotes a linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, who describes the Kiratas as "…people of East Asian appearance who were scattered along the eastern Himalayas from Nepal to India's Northeast and beyond…" and were "…evidently considered lesser mortals…" (145) by the Aryavarta. Similarly, the West's exterior gaze, according to Tilottoma Misra, dehumanized the people of the North-east "…colonial ethnographers whose accounts of the northeastern tribes often tend to deny even the basic human attributes to the tribesmen" (228). In fact, the documented accounts of the British are aplenty with the barbarism, head hunting, superstitions, drunkenness, savagery, and untameablility of the tribes in the North-east. Sajal Nag, a renowned historian on the North-east, provides an insight of Britisher's account of the region as being an "unknown jungle," "beyond the boundary of civilization" and "outside the civilized world" (34). While there are numerous accounts of the colonial gaze on the North-east as being reflective of the typical colonizer-colonized relationship people groups like the Nagas and Mizos had developed an affinity with the British that was characterized by a colonial experience of benevolence despite the apparent dissonance of the West's

dehumanizing ethnographic representations of the Northeast. To put it differently, expectations towards a shared postcolonial conscience with the rest of mainstream India fails to manifest itself due to nuanced differences and specificities in the lived colonial experiences of the frontier regions of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. Experiences that make explicit the altruism with which the region was approached by the erstwhile Britishers who respected the differences and distinctness of the people groups of the aforementioned states. As such, an alternate nationalism that did not see the colonizer as an antagonist force but as a well-wisher had evolved within parts of the North-east especially the hill areas, however the rest of mainland India's colonial experience was defined by the Britisher as an oppressive power; a crucial point of comparative difference in the lived-experiences of the people from the North-east that cannot be overlooked. Neither the mainland Indian nor the North-easterners experiences can be dismissed; both are equally legitimate in their own rights and warrant thoughtful speculations on how each of the two experiences are defined by socio-cultural and political realities of their respective social locations. The departure of the British and the subsequent postcolonial Indian state's exterior gaze on the North-east denied a respect and appreciation for the aforementioned differences and specificities that defined their indigeneity and a deeply-embedded religious Christian identity that evolved out of that colonial experience, especially among the hill states of Nagaland and Mizoram and hill regions of Manipur. Anup Shekar Chakraborty in his article "Social Imaginaries, Minorities and the Postcolonial History of a Region" (2021) highlights the way in which Christianity in the North-east evokes certain ways of looking at the region.

> The everyday images that the region, in general, evokes in the minds of the mainland Indians at large are that of tribes who have been converted to Christianity and, and as result, consider themselves to be different and distinct from mainland India." (7-8)

Birendranath Datta reveals that there is an interesting element of indigenization of external influences in the North-east which does not spare even the sacred disciplines of religious faiths, "…it may be pointed out that in this region even Islam and Christianity have taken characters which have local flavours" (122). One must be cognizant of the fact that the state of Manipur has a sizeable dominant Meitei community which is native to the region yet had been Sanskritized in the early

eighteenth century by Shankara Das Goswami and are also religious Hindus but have developed their own version of Hinduism which is seen to be a *tribal* version of the Hindu faith. Datta further elaborates on this point that while referring to both the Assamese and Manipuri Hindus "…even Sanskritized Hindu communities of this region retain elements which according to orthodox standards are patently tribal" (121). What this brings to the fore is the diversity and heterogeneity that characterizes and defines the very constitution of a region like the North-east, which is more often than not represented, as a homogenous entity through the exterior gaze of mainland India. S.S. Ghurye, a prominent sociologist, exemplifies the postcolonial Indian state's reflections on the North-east which bears dregs of a colonialist temperament of subjugations and impositions. Papori Bora's analysis of Ghurye's predispositions depict a tendency to impose a pan Indian framework while apparently ignoring differences that prominently characterize the people of the region, "… he merely reiterates colonial discourse in his understanding of the Northeastern tribes…in terms of colonial knowledge production which he merely Indianised" (47). There was an absence of appreciation for the uniqueness that foregrounded the region, in fact, the indigeneity and identity associated with native tribes of the North-east was seen as a threat. Though he was critical of the West's Orientalists constructions of India, "…he reframed the same Orientalist ideas within an understanding of Indian culture, which was equally problematic as it associated Indian culture and civilization with a Hinduness" (47-48). Bora's analysis of Ghurye's postures reveal that there is a mainstream Indian prejudice that is not inclusive of the tribal identities of the North-east within the definition of what constitutes the idea of India. Those elements that normatively define Indianness are conspicuous for their absence in the characterization of people groups indigenous to Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, as a localized form of Sanskritized traditions are largely restricted to the Imphal valley among the Meiteis.

> In recognizing the cultural distinctiveness of the 'tribal' people of the hill regions, we should bear in mind that the Sanskritization of the plain areas has been going on for centuries. The anxiety that looms large over tribal people of the Northeast as elsewhere has been 'how to preserve their culture and pristine identity(ies)'. (Chakraborty 7)

However, one must further contend that mainland Indian exterior gaze is not restricted to the exclusion of the North-east on the grounds of a distinctness associated with the region's unique colonial experience and heritage which is partly influenced by Christianity. In fact, McDuie-Ra considers the influence of religion and cultural difference as rather quite insignificant in defining the cause of mainstream India's otherization of the region. He stresses on the difference embedded in the racial constitution of the people groups indigenous to the region as being the fundamental grounds for discrimination; i.e, the Mongoloid racial features which is normatively looked upon as foreign to the Indian nation. In fact, the North-east of India finds its experience in the postcolonial Indian state to reflect a certain similitude with the erstwhile colonial mainstream Indian experience under the West's exterior gaze, albeit paradoxically that experience is a result of the mainland Indian racial gaze from within. McDuie-Ra asserts that people from the North-east find themselves discriminated against primarily on the grounds of physiognomical differences. A difference and distinction that is embedded in the Mongoloid phenotype of the populations that predominantly inhabit the region; an identity that does not appear to be or look normatively Indian.

> Indeed, while many communities certainly face discrimination, often-extreme discrimination, the case of people from the Northeast is unique because difference is couched almost exclusively as race rather than other fissures such as language, caste, religion etc." (36)

Sitlhou and Punathil make a strong emphasis on racism faced by North-easterners in Delhi, where discourse on identity of an Indian is often prescribed and normatively fixed leading to the exclusion of the Mongoloid face from "…the construct of 'what an Indian ought to look like'…" (115). In other words, to accept the racially different and distinct peoples of North-east India as equally constituting the idea of who an Indian ought to be would be to abnormalize the very definition of the notion of an Indian.

> The dichotomised notion of Northeasterners versus mainstream society is built upon a construction of a racially framed national core and its margin, the Northeast. The racially framed margin is further imagined as less integrated to the core because of cuisine, attire, and values and this denies substantial citizenship to people of the Northeast." (115)

The North-easterners' physiognomical appearance presents a racial other who brings the baggage of cultural practices and heritage that are pronouncedly treated as not being a part of the Indian tradition. Some people groups inhabiting the North-east region are represented as identities that stand in opposition to the mainstream Indian Aryan or Dravidian identity. The Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris are often seen and projected as foreigners because of their racial and socio-cultural distinctness from the rest of India and their genealogical traits dismissed often "… described to be an insignificant appendage to the 'Great Tradition',…" (Guite 76). The efforts to trivialize the indigenous identities are clearly witnessed in attempts to homogenize the region with the rest of mainland India denying the people dignity of uniqueness associated with their identities and socio-cultural and political positions. Guite further stresses on how "…seeing only the pasts of dominant community is not only an effort to assimilate, homogenize and solidify the diverse social realities in each state but also to legitimize and socialize the authority of the dominant community…" (85). The North-east has been represented through the mainland Indian gaze as not only a socio-cultural other, i.e., to some extent a non-Sanskritized genealogical other but mainly a racially distinct other originating from beyond its borders. This inability to accept the essentialized racial other in the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri, a difference and uniqueness that stands in contradiction to the construct of Indianness, engenders an approach towards the region that leads to exclusionary tendencies. An exclusion and rejection of all that stands for and represents the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri way of life while privileging norms and values associated with mainstream India. Bijukumar mentions how "…social exclusion, in many cases, leads to identity assertion which in turn causes conflict, sometimes violence" (22). Such forms of discrimination and exclusion of the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri identity instigates protest and resistance from within such communities in an effort to protect and preserve indigenous aesthetics norms and values. Klandermans in the article "Identity Politics and Politicized Identities: Identity Processes and the Dynamics of Protest" (2014) opines that acts of extremities tend to result from showing an indifference towards genuine demands of minorities, "…radicalization stems from a failure of the state to absorb the demands of frustrated, marginalized groups" (2). On many occasions the efforts and endeavors on part of the people groups from North-east India to defend and safeguard one's identity, i.e., the

Naga, Mizo or Manipuri identity, is misrepresented as rebellions against the Indian nation.

> Those who wished to carry over the nationalism of the Independence period and that of the post-independence period had to be substantially different. Here we are dealing with people who are in the process of becoming a part of India without self-consciously involving themselves in the struggle for independence. (Misra, *India's North-east* 85)

One must also be cognizant of the fact that the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri contexts also present the extreme ends of taking up arms against the Indian state, at times with the ultimate aim of independence from India, in order to protect their respective ways of life. Yasmin Saikia and Amit R. Baishya denote that what was once presented as the untamed and wild colonial frontier space is "…recast as the 'violence-ridden' borderland inhabited by disgruntled and disloyal subjects in the postcolonial period" (7). To borrow from Agamben there is a state of exception created around the biopolitical lives of the people of the North-east region where the efforts to preserve and protect the *bios* of their indigeneity is very often treated with prejudice as "…all voices of protest including genuine articulations of the region had been designated as 'law and order' problems" (Ngaihte 14). Amit R. Baishya looks into the consequences of the Indian state's myopic treatment of all forms of protests in the region as a 'law and order' problem. He asserts that invocation of a law like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 is one of the outcomes of the law and order and in extension military external gaze on the region and the "…cultures of impunity it has spawned in the region has left a deep impact at the level of everyday life" (6). The ordinary and normal become extraordinary and abnormal and the everyday is "…unmade in states of terror…" and "…remade as violence descends into the ordinary…" (8).

> It emphasizes on the techniques used to classify, mark out and regulate a 'suspect population' or 'suspect community', thereby domesticating wartime practices in the everyday legal discourse, particularly the everyday vocabulary of AFSPA. Illegal detention, torture and custodial death(s) become routine when such exceptionalism is normalized… (Chubatila 173)

In other words, the abnormal becomes the normal of everyday life in many parts of the region, especially as it currently stands in Manipur and Nagaland. "The military campaign and regulations undermine basic fundamental rights and cause human rights violations. Excess militarisation results in regional alienation and frustrations" (Shimray 4637). The stereotypical presuppositions that are constructed and assigned to the region are unequivocally around the notions that identity of North-east India is highly *suspect* as the *violence* is a result of a deliberate act of *betrayal* of the Indian state. In fact the people groups from the North-east are directly questioned about their Indianness as Sitlhou and Punathil allude to how the "…practice of racism against people from the Northeast in mainland India is of a different order in which their identity as an Indian is questioned" (113). A well-informed understanding of the challenges on the ground reveal that such stereotypes warrant an in depth analysis and the need to exercise efforts to deconstruct misrepresentations about the North-east is highly compelling. The essentialized positivist perspective of the Indian state for its inability to broaden the scope of what constitutes the Indian identity racially or socio-culturally is duly established in the fixed nature of its gaze on the North-east of India; dismissing the indigeneity associated with the region as an other. Monalisa Changkija asserts that "In fact, justice cannot be done to Northeastern culture, traditions, literature, music, or our entire value-system, if they are perceived from the lens of colonial India or Independent India" (135). It is not just an otherization but an exclusion and discrimination against racial, cultural, linguistic and religious attributes of the people groups belonging to the region. K.B. Veio Pou in an article titled "Making of a Frontier Literature" (2013) refers to a persistent point of critical concern about the states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, "Too little understood by the rest of the country, this region has largely remained 'imagined'" (76). But then the question is who will speak out and generate a discourse about the silenced, oppressed and excluded lived experiences of people groups from the North-east. Is this a question that needs to be addressed by the general population of the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur? Is the common man on the ground adequately empowered to speak out on his own?

> In the cartographic imaginary, Northeast means many things to many people–those who live in it, those who know and write about it, and those who read about it. (Baral 5)

Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983) is a seminal text that enables a well-articulated understanding of the concept of representation in addressing the plight of those in positions of oppressed marginality. Spivak addresses a key question of whether the oppressed can speak and know their own conditions, "In the Foucault Deleuze conversation, the issue seems to be that there is no representation, no signifier; theory is a relay of practice and the oppressed can know and speak for themselves" (34). Though Foucault and Deleuze denounce the need for intellectuals to represent the oppressed, Spivak, differs and asserts that there is an enormous gap between the Europe that they inhabit and third world developing nations like India whose margins have no realistic options but to be spoken for. In other words, the subalterns cannot articulate the marginality of their position but through representational intellectual voices. Within the context of the North-east the silencing takes place because of varying reasons. "Some of them remain silent as a form of active avoidance, others due to socially/politically sanctioned silence, still others for different reasons" (Guite 92). What Spivak asserts here is the fact that there are positions of marginality that are differentiated by the localized and unique contexts within which representation is an undeniable prerequisite, "…the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation" (40). The act of representation that Spivak in the aforementioned essay highlights are through the use of two German words *vertreten* and *darstellen*. *Vertreten* as an act of representation refers to the act of *standing in for* whereas *darstellen* also as an act of representation refers to the *act of portrayal or to describe*. The use of *vertreten* takes place in a context that denotes representation where one *speaks or acts on behalf of someone or something* i.e., *to stand in*. While depicting a *particular subject in a work of art*, i.e., *to portray or to describe* is the highlight of the use of the term *darstellen*. Both acts of representation are highly relevant within the present study of the marginality in the context of North-east India, especially through the efforts of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom.

The self's interior recognition of Naga, Mizo, or Manipuri identity presents a dialectical stance, in its essentialized form, and voices lived-experiences that stand in opposition to the gaze of mainstream India. The need for intellectual representative voices both of *vertreten* and *darstellen* in articulating the indigenous voices and

identities from the North-east, in general, is absolutely critical but even more significant for states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur where acknowledged literary figures in the English language are few. Moreover, as Parag M. Sarma highlights, one must also be cognizant of the genuine possibility that "…such literary exercise can be understood to go beyond the mere urge tell a story and include the subtleties of writing back to the mainstream from the margins, an attempt to write into the consciousness of an emerging nation" (39). Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom are all key figures belonging to that rare group of literary figures who can both *vertreten* of their respective people groups and also artistically 'portray and describe' *darstellen* their lived-experiences through literary modes of expressions. In performing this critical task of speaking out on behalf of the people groups in the North-east, Easterine Kire highlights important concerns around critical thought that goes into the construction of North-east literature through an essay titled "Writing from the heart" (2018). Kire asserts that people groups in the North-east go through many "definitions" (11) which go on to "label us" (11), and how these labels go on to become "constructed identities" (13) of people of the region. She draws one's attention to the fact that "constructed identity" (12) or stereotypes are built around the region being "conflicted" (12) and "blood and gore" (12) and all this with the presupposition that the North-east is always up against the Indian state is made apparent in "…how national media chooses to write us" (12). How does the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri self recognize themselves through this process of being stereotyped? Parag M. Sarma asserts that the North-east and efforts to represent it has "…its own unique challenges, and any attempts to access it must be informed and infused by the unique social and political setting of the region…" (45). The differences embedded in the Northeast vis-à-vis mainstream India reveals that representative knowledge one might unearth is heavily dependent on the willingness to recognize its indigeneity. If this indigeneity is not genuinely appreciated all efforts to engage with states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur will become disingenuous. However, the indigeneity and roots that make up the identity of the people of the region cannot be comprehensively gleaned from an external effort to decode the region; it is absolutely crucial for representative intellectual voices from the states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur to articulate the roots that the people are bound to. Smith alludes to the need for "…recovering our own stories of the past…is extricably bound to a recovery of our language and

epistemological foundations" (43). Kire stresses on the need to focus on an insider's perspectives by "writing outside the box" (11) and not within the defined externally "constructed identity" (12) or stereotypes created as labels for identities originating from the region. "The emerging trend of going back to their cultural roots helps the creative writers find metaphors with which they speak of themselves" (Veio Pou 83). *Bitter Wormwood* authored by Easterine Kire is a work that provides a narrative of the insider's perspectives on the Naga nationalist movement for an independent Nagaland. There is a reference to what is commonly referred to as the Naga insurgency movement as a "…war that they'd begun with India more than 60 years ago…" and how an all out effort to protect their "ancestral lands" takes place (10). What it clearly implies is the Nagas seemingly understood themselves to be an independent entity not under the jurisdiction of the nascent postcolonial Indian state. James C. Scott's reference to the non-state spaces of *Zomia* where the tribes like the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis lived in relative autonomy for many many centuries. This precolonial stateless existence of the North-east feeds into the notions of difference and distinctiveness that provides a strong focus on ancestral homelands of the Nagas in independent existence. In *Bitter Wormwood* there is a strong belief that Naga Hills was not a part of India and this could be recognized in the everyday conversation of the common folks. The news of Gandhi's assassination, when Mose, his mother and grandmother hear about it, though they are shocked by the incident, they, spontaneously address him as the leader of the Indians. Mose's grandmother, Khrienuo, curiously asks "Gandhi. Isn't that the old man, who is the leader of the Indians?" (47) This rather unconscious reference to Gandhi as a leader of the Indian people unequivocally reveals their stance against the Indian as the other which was deeply embedded in the Naga consciousness. This Naga consciousness is primarily influenced by a poetics of difference and distinctness associated with their land and space that is Nagaland. This integral belief of being a separate entity appears at the level of institutions like schools and churches as well. At the Mission school where Mose was a student, the headmaster, while paying tribute to Gandhi during assembly, speaks about Gandhi's opinion on the Naga issue that the Nagas have every right to a separate nation. "This was truly a great man who understood the rights of all human beings. Gandhi's death is a loss not only to India but to the Nagas and to the whole world" (48). The reference to Gandhi's death evoking a sense of loss to the Nagas in a distinct manner from the loss to India once

again denotes the indigenous voice of the people as it resonates through the headmaster of the school. The influence and impact of the church in the Naga scenario cannot be overlooked either, as can be discerned through the pastor, who in a church service on Sunday morning announces at the end of the service,

> We need to pray for our land. The Indian government has taken Zapuphizo prisoner for saying that the Naga people want independence…Please continue to pray in your homes for peace in our land. (52)

After the Sunday morning service, the people went into discussions, and Khrienuo states that "Well, that is quite right. We have never been a part of India before. Why should we join them now?" She goes on to further address her grandson Mose, "…ask your Jisu to get Phizo out of jail soon" (53). Khrienuo's remarks explicitly reveals that Christ is a central figure in the Naga consciousness and that Christianity occupies a very important place within the Naga identity. However, within the Naga context one realizes that Mose's grandmother's link to Christianity, when she refers to Jesus as "your Jisu", determines that her generation's familiarity with Christianity is one different from that of Mose who is studying at the Mission school.

> Khrienuo and Vilaü were both non-Christians, but Mose had begun to recite the Christian prayers he learned at school. When he was quite convinced that he wanted to worship the Christian God, a gentle conversion of the whole family took place. (51)

Life on Hold another work authored by Easterine Kire depicts through the character of Setuo, a friend of the protagonist Roko, the conditions surrounding the fight for the homeland. In the novella, the Indian army is perceived to be an occupying force in the region and the opposition towards it is strongly perceived to be for a noble cause, "The old soldiers had urged one another onward with the reminder that they were fighting for their homeland…" (21). Notions around the protection of the ancestral lands and homeland denote not only an indigeneity associated with the space but a sacredness as well and the war to protect it undeniably an honorable cause. Manjeet Baruah in an article titled "An Emerging Genre of 'Political' Literature in India's Frontier" (2013) alludes to the Naga political problem as one reflected in Anurag Mahanta's Assamese novel *Aulingar Zui* (2007) where "…there are no references to Indian nation building, rather only to military occupation (of Nagaland)

by Indian military forces" (30). Roko, in *Life on Hold*, who had just turned fifteen and was just a school-going boy, came across the dead body of young man in the wood beside their school. News around the corpse was that he was someone who died fighting for the honorable Naga cause of protecting the motherland and was a "national worker" (21). Roko was "…forever transformed after the sight of that young man in the wood…obsessed by the stories of the national workers. He couldn't stop talking about them and the freedom struggle" (21). Though there is not a reference to established school authorities presented here as in the case of *Bitter Wormwood*, the school as a place of learning is juxtaposed with a corpse of the freedom fighter which inspires other young minds; and the education or knowledge being imparted is one for the Naga cause. Later in *Life on Hold* as one of the main protagonists, Nime, advances to a higher level of college education, there is reference to the presence of national workers among college students as well. In the lives of the ordinary people, as depicted in *Life on Hold* reveals the presence of a strong sense of Christianity being deeply embedded in the Naga consciousness. This is found in the description of one the characters in the novella, "Bounuo was a God-fearing person and a regular church-goer" (92). There are numerous references to how the people call out on God in their times of ordeal as they seek comfort and solace through the Christian faith. The deeper the intensity of the crisis the greater the vigor with which they call upon their God hoping for his intervention. Setuo the common friend of Nime and Roko advises Nime to "Go home and pray for him, that is the only thing to do now. Pray hard" (29). Nime's prayer for Roko's well-being amidst the conflict is reflected in her dedicated commitment to call upon God every day for Roko's safety, "Every morning she prayed. God, don't let him be killed" (30).

In *Bitter Wormwood*, a very crucial point around the recognition of the Naga identity as being unique and distinct from that of Indian identity manifests itself in the vote of the Naga public that was taken to determine whether the they wanted to be independent or not. The plebiscite that was to be conducted was believed by the common village folks, including Mose, Vilaü and Khrienuo, as the ultimate answer to their problems.

> A man carefully explained that they were collecting signatures and thumbprints of those who wanted a free Nagaland. They would send all

> the signatures to the Prime Minister of India and then he would give them their freedom. Mose, Khrienuo and Vilaü readily joined in. (56)

However, the result of the plebiscite does not bring about the confident and intended results of an independent Nagaland for Mose and his family. In fact the occupying forces of the Indian army increases in unbelievable measures. The Naga voice of self-determination through plebiscite is seen as an act of disloyalty and betrayal to the Indian state and as such heavy military deployment is initiated as a measure to counter a law and order problem. This Naga consciousness of a poetics of difference which unfolds in the way the Naga identifies himself establishes grounds for conflict with the Indian state. The plebiscite had revealed that the Naga self's interior recognition saw a Naga nation distinct from the external influences of India. There is a reference to the Prime Minister of India whose statements on the Nagas demand for self-determination through the result of the plebiscite was promptly rejected and dismissed.

> Do you know what Nehru said when he got his copy of the Naga plebiscite? He shook his and shouted, "Whether heaven falls or India goes to pieces and blood runs red in the country, I don't care. Nagas will not be allowed to become independent." How can we live under such a man ? Can we live under such a government? (62)

Dolly Kikon asks a rather pertinent and relevant question, "Why does a multicultural democracy like India lack a framework to tackle demands of ethnic groups and nationalist movements, other than a coercive one?" (2836) Tilottoma Misra also addresses a key point with regards to Nehru's official commitments towards the North-east and the overall philosophical approach that he aspired to subscribe to.

> As a part of the 'Nehru Plan', all developmental initiatives in the region were to be implemented while keeping in mind that, "people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them." ("Crossing Linguistic" 219)

The disturbing irony is that in the very initial stages of the Naga conflict images of blood and violence from the accounts of the first Prime Minister are evoked and the above Nehru Plan reflects and calls into question the sanctity of his claims. And Nehru's own image is closely associated with Gandhi a man known for peacefully negotiating the independence of India from the oppressive regime of the British. So

were Nehru's so called plan of trusting the natural genius of the people just a political rhetoric? As such, the poetics of difference plays itself out as the Indian army's unwanted presence is increased, manifesting itself not only in terms of military threat, but as a linguistic threat to the Naga identity as well. "The new security forces were rough and spoke Hindi. They were armed and carried weapons" (56). It prompts Khrienuo to ask "What will they do to us? They can't force us to become Indian" (55). The self's interior recognition in the Naga context is deeply linked to a Naga identity that reveals a fraternity or a camaraderie of an imagined Naga nationhood, as Benedict Anderson defines the idea of a nation, as a people who are willing to "…not so much kill, as willing to die for…" (7). When the Indian parliamentary elections were going to be held as announced over the radio young Mose explains the election process to his grandmother and mother that people would sign or put their thumb prints on little pieces of papers. They respond in cognizance by saying that it was similar to the process of having placed their thumb prints to vote for independence from India the year before – referring to the plebiscite. Khrienuo states very firmly that "Well, we don't have to vote for the Prime Minister of India. That's none of our business" (63). The Naga consciousness of difference finds itself articulated once again where a clear distinction is drawn between the affairs of the Indian state vis-à-vis the Nagas. However, when the occasion for the actual elections came around villagers including Khrienuo and Vilaü were rounded up by soldiers and policemen at the Village council. All the villagers were placed under life-threatening pressure to take part in the elections and Khrienuo provides the following account.

> The policeman forced us to put our thumbprints on little pieces of paper and put it in a box. There were several boxes. A man refused to do as they said. One of the policemen hit him on the side of his head with his rifle and he fell to the ground. After that, everyone did as they were told and put their thumbprints on the papers. (64)

The ever-increasing military presence becomes a matter of critical concern for all the villagers in Mose's town. Mose asks Neituo his close friend if he had ever seen so many soldiers before. "Never. My father says that even during the Japanese war, they had only half the number of soldiers than what we have here now" (66). But they soon hear from other sources that it was not just their village but the interior villages are also going through enormous violence and trauma. The kind of news that begins

to trickle in everyday became agonizingly painful to come to terms with. “The Indian army has burnt several Ao and Sema villages and raped women and killed some gaonburas. In some villages, they have killed many innocent people” (66). Mose and Neituo as two young boys, who were not old enough yet to join the Naga fight for independence, heard of news their seniors committing themselves by joining the honorable cause of defending the Naga nation – the Naga way of life which was under threat. Shimray discusses how young people’s exposure to such a kind of life eventually leads to deep seated hatred, “…the young boys and girls growing up in the presence of army atrocities, witnessing disrespect to their culture and traditions begin to hate the armed forces and the larger population” (4637-38).

> School was very unstable, closing frequently for days at a time. Sporadic shooting broke out in town one evening. It shocked everyone and people went scurrying home. Soon after that more and more young men disappeared. Men in their twenties, unmarried young men. Some were educated, some not, the uneducated one outnumbered the others. (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 67)

In *Bitter Wormwood* Mose and Neituo’s schooling becomes erratic, as each day rolls by there is more that adds to the already existing disturbance to the normal order of life as they were accustomed to. In effect, to borrow from Agamben, a state of exception was created and it began to be established that all Naga lives could be easily disposed of without any concern. The atrocities that were being committed by the Indian army, especially ones that were against civilians began to pile up, people were forced to watch the display of fellow Nagas being mocked at by the soldiers. Everyone was shocked at the incidents and fear was instigated in the Naga villagers as the Indian army had expected. “At the same time, it roused deep anger in the community” (63). Mose, Vilaü and Khrienuo expected that their radio would speak of the atrocities that were being committed upon the land and people of Nagaland. But to their consternation the radio which was their source of reliable news refused to speak of the reality of their predicament – the silence was highly pronounced. “‘Listen again, Mose, maybe they will talk about it,’ his grandmother insisted. But there was never any mention of the horrors at home on the radio” (68). The radio here is representative of the exterior’s gaze as the Naga self’s concerns are found completely sidetracked through the radio’s deafening silence of their experiences of the Indian army’s

atrocities. It makes a clear distinction about what is considered newsworthy by those in positions of power and the neglect of Mose's plight is representative of the Naga predicament of being rendered mute.

The Indian state's gaze upon the Naga's is one grounded in insurgency against the nation, however, Nagas on the ground see the Indian army's move into the region as an intrusion and illegal occupation of their land. Effectively what sets out as an attempt by the Indian state to contain the acts of a disgruntled and disloyal people becomes the Naga people's war to protect Nagaland because of the indiscriminate acts of violence exercised against them. Mose too experiences a heavy personal loss, that of his dear grandmother, who is shot in the fields where she was at her daily farm work. Mose disbelievingly learns that his innocent and beloved grandmother's murderer is protected under the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953, (a precursor of AFSPA 1958) which empowers a soldier to shoot and kill, ironically in the case of Khrienuo to maintain public order. "Mose watched in disbelief. Then he cried and cried like a child. After some time a deep rage overpowered his sorrow, and he had no more tears left" (71). Amit R. Baishya discusses how "categories like 'life' and 'living' seem to be continuously shadowed by unpredictability, arbitrariness and risk" (2). The lives of Mose and those that form a part of his immediate circle of friends and family are a reflection of the experiences of the general Naga population of the time. The violence and atrocities committed upon even the civilians depicted the harsh fact that Naga lives did not matter. Any Naga could become a victim of the conflict, and the Indian army represented a force who indiscriminately treated all Nagas as objects of derision, consequently this aroused deep-seated resentment and anger at the Indian other. "This is too much. We are not *tefü thevo.* We are not animals that they can shoot us when they will" (59). For the Nagas it soon became a question of fighting for Naga survival and the Naga identity – the protection of the Naga way of life. Vilaü, Mose's mother feared that her son too would perhaps be compelled to join this new war. But when the time came and Mose decided to join the honor of protecting Naga people and their land Vilaü remembered that the midwife had said her son would be a warrior one day. "Vilaü knew that a woman could not stand between a man and his destiny, even if the man was her son" (83).

In *Bitter Wormwood* there was another occasion when an Indian soldier shot dead a young father who was returning home late at night. On examining the body of

the victim he was not identified to be any faction member and nothing illegal was found on his body. An enormous protest erupted against the killing of the young father however, the army man was protected from any legal charges under AFSPA 1958. The Indian army claimed that when he was ordered to stop the man behaved in a suspicious manner and as such the subsequent shooting. Under AFSPA, every Indian soldier was given immunity from being tried by the court of law.

> The family and clan of the murdered man could do nothing about it. A protest rally was held by the public and speeches were made condemning the killing. There was nothing forthcoming from the state government nor was anything expected. (169)

The resistance and protest against AFSPA has been undertaken quite popularly by the women of Manipur. Irom Sharmila's sixteen-year-long fast to dissolve the extraordinary law at New Delhi has been recognized as one of the more noteworthy efforts. The infamous but shocking naked women's protest at Kangla Fort in Imphal is another landmark effort to have AFPSA repealed from the region. However, one must also recognize the efforts of the Naga women, specifically the Naga Mothers' Association who have contributed to the formidable resistance against the extraordinary provisions of AFSPA. In *Bitter Wormwood* Mose refers to the role of the Naga Mothers' Association in opposing the extraordinary law that has been the cause of gross human rights violations against the Naga people by the Indian army.

> By the way, I've heard that the Naga Mothers' Association are holding a rally to demand justice for the army killing. They might ask for the AFSPA to be removed, said Mose. Feels like we have been asking for that forever. The damnable thing is, these laws are almost impossible to remove once they are in place. It's also called State terrorism. (171)

What this in effect signified was the fact that the Indian state imposed a state of exception on the whole region. An entire populace being placed under such an extraordinary law could only mean the confrontation of what the Indian state considers extraordinary circumstances. The biopolitical management of an entire people group under *zoé* where distinction between the civilian population and the underground was not found to be of any significance. One cannot but admit that the absence of a politically valued life of the Naga population in its entirety is rather unsettling and disturbing. In fact it can be interpretated to be the complete and absolute otherization

of the other in the Naga who is by the definitions of the external Indian gaze seen to be a foreigner. The attributes of the Naga cannot be placed within any familiar concept of the idea of India and as such is rendered an alien whose identity can be cast outside the Indian *bios*. Later in *Bitter Wormwood* Himmat Singh a retired police officer, who was the Commandant of 24rth SAF Battalion headquartered at Madhya Pradesh, recollects his past time in Nagaland when his grandson and his Naga classmate at Delhi engage him in an in depth conversation. The two friends, Rakesh and Neibou are curious about every bit of Himmat Singh's experiences in the land of the Nagas. One finds Himmat Singh reflecting back on the past when his battalion was initially posted to the North-eastern region of Nagaland that stresses heavily on the poetics of difference which contributes to the critical otherization of the Naga people.

> Our men were not used to jungle warfare. Not knowing the language and always isolated in our fortified posts, it was like walking around blindfolded in a mine-field every time we went out. We felt alienated because we entered Nagaland with the understanding that the Nagas were fellow Indians but the truth was that the Nagas looked completely different and obviously hated our presence there. (199-200)

The admission on part of Himmat Singh speaks volumes about the way the Indian state or the average mainstream Indian sees the Mongoloid North-easterner or the Naga in this specific context. The poetics of difference embedded in the essentialist definition of the idea of India, as highlighted earlier, defies the rules of acceptance for a Naga who is labelled an absolute racial other. Udayon Misra discusses grounds of otherization that are rife because people from the North-east or "…the margins in the heartland of India and their demand that they be treated as equal citizens of the country pose a challenge to all those who have been accustomed to seeing only the dominant version of Indian culture" (6).

While stressing on the need to develop an appreciative paradigm towards cultures of North-east India, Parag M. Sarma draws one's attention to the need to make an, "… attempt to challenge hierarchy of cultures, and posit difference and plurality as a valid way of life" (39). The conditions representing indigenous Mizo concerns bear great similarities with those of the Naga people yet is unique in its own way. Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* is a novel representative of the voices of difference that are indigenous to the state of Mizoram. Though Mizoram has often been projected to be

one of the most peaceful states in the North-east, it was a peace earned through a tremendous process of twenty years of disturbance and armed rebellion, which began in 1966 and concluded with the 1986 Peace Accord between the Indian state and Mizoram. Unlike, the states of Nagaland and Manipur, Mizoram does not presently have any active insurgent groups who make demands on the Indian state. However, it is important to recognize that Mizoram's own disturbing history of the aforementioned twenty years (1966-1986) continues to inform and influence the life and psyche of its populace. *Zorami* is a narrative that takes one back to the past which was surrounded by the keen desire of the Mizo people to assert their indigenous identity in all its uniqueness. Like the Naga people, the Mizo consciousness saw itself as distinct and not as merely an extension of the Indian state, in fact the Indian was seen as a racial other as much as the Mizo was considered a racial other by the mainstream Indian. In *Zorami* Thanchhunga, who is the father of Zorami the protagonist of the novel, is in Nagaland on duty, when "…they saw some men of the Indian race coming to meet them from the opposite direction" (28). This reference to the men as being of the Indian race strongly denotes that there is a significant poetics of difference at work in the Mizo's perception of a racial other which counters the stereotypical external racial gaze from mainstream India. The novel unravels the notion of a Mizo consciousness and identity that stands in opposition to the Indian consciousness or identity as it presents a distinctness that is undeniable. The Indian army, as in the case of Kire's Naga consciousness, is represented as an occupying force and Mizoram as a homeland that needs to be set free. Nikhuma, a character from the novel, in the chapter titled "The Patriot", is described as a "a true Mizo pa" (71) or otherwise "a rough countryman" (71) who gives up his job to pursue his dream – "…the dream of a self-governing, independent Mizoram" (71). On being informed by messengers from Aizawl that the time had come and that he had been called upon by the leaders of the movement, Nikhuma, put together his "…bedding, a shirt, a pair of pants and a puan…a machete; a bunch vaihlo zial, tobacco rolled in strips of thin paper…" (75) and set out on his way. Nikhuma's immediate and urgent response clearly denotes the nobility he associates with the cause and how endearingly he sets out as the "…call of the motherland had come, he could not stay a moment longer" (74). It is reflective of the same sacredness assigned to the Naga imagination associated with the fight for the freedom of one's homeland. Many other characters in the novel like Nikhuma have

been inspired by the leader of the Mizo National Front (MNF), Pu Laldenga who had voiced the aspirations of the Mizo population.

> From time immemorial, our ancestors lived in total independence without any foreign interference. We had never been conquered or subjugated…during the British rule, they annexed our country and brought it under their government. That is how our land became part of India after the British left. (60)

The above account on how Mizoram became a part of India presents the Mizos love for their freedom; a freedom that they cherished and the dissatisfaction that they felt with the Britishers handing over Mizoram to the postcolonial Indian state. Scott's thesis on the precolonial conditions of statelessness and non-state characteristics of the North-east had provided for a notion of freedom in the Mizo consciousness that influences the Mizos of the postcolonial era. Bhupen Sarmah explains that while attempting to promote the logic of political integration of the regions like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur with the rest of India, "…it is essential to see the Nation state project placing it vis-à-vis the colonial logic of annexation of the region which has often been projected as a 'historical accident'" (17). Prior to the momentum that the MNF was able to gain in the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s, there was a looming linguistic imposition, in the form of the Assamese language, that threatened the Mizo identity and indigenous existence. Zorami, the protagonist, as a young class one student in a school is excited about watching the march past during the Republic Day celebrations at Lammual Aizawl. A treat she and her friends were absolutely excited about and after having attended the "grand show" (34) Zorami, her friend Kimtei and their senior from class three, Khumtei, are confronted with a group of protesters holding placards and shouting, "We do not want Assamese language! We do not want goblin-scripts! A few months back the Assam government had ordered that Assamese should be compulsorily taught in all the schools" (34). The three school-going young girls excitedly joined the protests shouting at the top of their voices to show opposition. But Zorami managed to only fully come to the knowledge of why Assamese language and its introduction in the Mizo District Council region was an unwanted development from her father. He explains that the state officials, "…are trying to force us to use it for all important matters…we Mizo people would become like fools in our own homeland" (35). In the Mizo context, Mizoram being a district council of the state of

Assam prior to the twenty years of disturbance, the Assam government often exerted its own personal priorities. And, of course, the Assamese nationalism on this occasion attempted to universalize its linguistic norms on the minority groups, like the Mizos, who had been officially placed within Assam's territorial political jurisdiction for administrative convenience.

The biopolitical theoretical considerations of Foucault and Agamben are evoked here once again, and just as it was in the case of the Nagas, the Mizos too were placed under some very trying conditions. The *bios* and *zoé* of the Mizo identity vis-à-vis the mainstream Indian identity raises some salient questions about how the Indian state sees the Mizo. In *Zorami*, there is mention of the strange yet traditionally feared local phenomenon of the *mautam* or bamboo flowering which leads to an incredible increase in the rat population. The rats devour the flowers of the bamboo plant and then multiply heavily to decimate all edible crops in the fields, especially the rice paddy leading to the dreaded famine of the lands of the Mizos every fifty years. Zorami's mother is found explaining to her inquisitive young daughter the meaning of *mautam*. "It means bamboos dying. Bamboos flower once in fifty years, produce fruit and then they die. Rats eat the fallen fruit and give birth to a large number of babies…" (33). The Mizos are found lamenting their miserable conditions of the severe famine in the years leading to the March 1966 declaration of independence from India by the MNF. Interestingly the MNF is formed out of the Mizo National Famine Front (MNFF) that had been established locally because the Indian state failed to take necessary measures to address the ill-fated famine.

> It was a mistake to become a part of India. We should have joined Burma instead. India is treating us like stepsons because we are a different race. It is nothing to them even if we all die out. They will just come and occupy our land, that's all. (33)

The poetics of difference is clearly at play once again, as the Mizo's perception of dismissive attitude towards their authentic needs are denied on the grounds of what is labelled above as a "different race" (33). The MNF in the build-up of regional and local sentiments against the negligence shown by the Indian state during the famine further exacerbated the existing conditions of alienation already felt by the Mizos. The MNF's declaration of Operation Jericho to fight for independence from India in March 1966 was rendered an act of rebellion and insurgency by the Indian state. "In about

two days, the government's response arrived. Air raids. Burning, destruction, deaths" (79). The Indian state's exterior gaze on the region was one where a state of exception could be declared instantly, without a second thought, because it saw the people as being different and not Indian in the same way as Himmat Singh and his jawans from Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* were compelled to admit. Rooplekha Borgohain alludes here that there was "…the tendency was to ignore the plurality of nations, their identities and histories and to stress on one history, language, social project, cultural models, in short one nation identity" (12). Udayon Misra had in the same line of thought, as highlighted earlier, very astutely stated that most mainstream Indians' experience was only of the "dominant version of Indian culture" (6). To borrow from Agamben, the Mizo identity was not rendered a part of the Indian *bios* – a politically valued life, it was a just a bare life – *zoé*. A biopolitical life and a cultural life that could be disposed of without much after thought or concern because it does not conform to India's own *bios*.

> As they went up on a hillside, Aizawl town was clearly visible from the path. They heard the sound of aeroplanes, and saw that they were flying low over Aizawl. Somethings dropped down from the planes, loud cracking sound and fire followed. It's burning, houses are burning! …They're dropping bombs! They all watched in horror. (87)

The formidable use of the mighty Indian air force against what India calls its own citizen, who were placed in a state of exception, and bombed as though India was at war with a foreign country sends a deafening message. The possibility of declaring such a state of exception that had prompted the only instance that the Indian state ever bombed its own territory and people obviously raises critical questions about whether the Mizos fall within the definitions of the idea of India – the Indian *bios*.

> The state was under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act since it was declared a disturbed area. The Indian army could do as they please; no one could stop them as they had sanction of the highest authority in the country. (117)

In *Zorami*, the Church is an institution that depicts not only the religious voice of the Mizos but a deeply embedded voice within the Mizo consciousness making it an integral part of their very identity. On Sundays the pace of life comes to a spontaneous halt in the blue hills of Mizoram and is observed closely as a sacred day

of worship and prayers. Malsawmi Jacob portrays Sunday morning scenes in great detail, "…morning church-bells pealed…different tones and rhythms…rang out from all directions…people of all ages hurried towards their churches" (11). Zorami, the protagonist's own traumatic condition finds healing in the word of God. The Gospel according to Luke is read out and finds a prominent position at the very outset of the novel in the prologue, "When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are healed of your sickness'" (14). The Christian faith and its ubiquitous presence in the Mizo society is undoubtedly undeniable and this finds its manifestation through the account of Zorami's life and also through other characters in the novel. One of the main grounds for choosing a partner is a man's religious disposition whether one is a believer or not genuinely matters in the Mizo society. In *Zorami*, Sanga the prospective husband's credentials are defined by his social standing and character but an important defining and decisive factor is determined by his "God-fearing" (55) nature. Another character from one of the villages Nikhuma before being called upon to step up for the motherland is completely immersed in the spirit of the upcoming Christmas season as for him, "The town of Bethlehem was the point of focus this season" (72). He even makes comparison of the lights from the torches carried by the messengers from Aizawl to the light that the shepherds witnessed during Jesus Christ's birth, "Suddenly, he saw lights. Not a bright light like the Shepherds saw near Bethlehem when an angel came to announce the birth of Jesus" (73).

Malsawmi Jacob's book of poems *Four Gardens and Other Poems* is a collection of works that address a wide variety of themes. Among the many themes, the origins, identity and indigeneity of the Mizos finds significant mention in this collection of works which stress on differences and distinctiveness from mainstream India. The racially-loaded inquisition often posed to the Northeasterner, with Mongoloid physiognomical attributes, in her poem "Identities" is articulated, "'Where are you from?' you ask/ not my name, not who I am/" (lines 1-2). The mainstream Indian gaze from without does not consider the racial features associated with the Northeast as being representative of the Indian identity. It is implied that the mainstream Indian questioner from the very physical appearance of the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri treats him or her as a foreigner or an outsider and Jacob is compelled to say you "give me such strange looks/like I don't belong to the same earth" (lines 26-27). The marginalized voice of the Mizos, silenced over many decades, Jacob reveals finds

space for a long overdue articulation. In her other poem "Identity" she unequivocally expresses a certain sense of relief from an emotionally overwhelming past, a past that was incapable of voicing Mizo indigeneity and rootedness, which finds a representative artistic space of expression, "Our voice buried many years/is now beginning to rise" (lines 8-9). This same voice enables an emancipating platform to articulate the Mizo's genealogical origins; the historically significant mention of "Chhinlung" cave "One day, they say, out of this cave/our ancestors emerged; out they marched/tribe by tribe" (lines-4-6). Malsawmi Jacob makes a clear reference to popular oral accounts of historical ties of the Mizos with geographical spaces situated towards the east. According to a renowned Mizo historian C. Sangkima, the ancestors of the Mizos came out of a big cave named "Chhinlung" (11) which is supposedly located in present day China. Jacob writes "That's where I came from: a cave of stone with/ jagged edge…"(lines 1-2). K.C. Baral alludes to the people groups from the North-east like the Mizos and how "…their home define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures" (6).

The state of Manipur is the sixteenth state of India and was for a certain time period in history a princely state. In comparison to Nagaland and Mizoram, Manipur presents a rather nuanced set of conditions around the question of Manipuri identity. The three major identity groups are the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis with the Meiteis being the dominant community in Manipur. Robin S. Ngangom is a Meitei poet who may be considered a pan-Manipuri representative voice yet it would be more accurate to consider his poetic articulations to show a greater affinity to Meitei sentiments and temperaments. Ngangom in "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry: An Overview" (2011) describes how Manipur has undergone tremendous transformations:

> A one-time princely kingdom with visions of grandeur, which fell into the clutches of the British colonial regime and ultimately freed, only to become a part of the Indian Union under dubious circumstances, Manipur became just another corrupt and disillusioned state under the new dispensation. After the trauma of World War II, there were distinct transformations in the political and social life of this erstwhile feudal state. Shared areas of experience for many would include loss of traditional values in human affairs, the tyranny of those who wield

> economic and political power, rootlessness, dispossession, fragmentation of home and family, urbanisation, and interestingly, the disturbing consequence of the struggles of those who cherish freedom in a perceived neo-colonial regime, and the misgivings of those who felt that they were losing their identity and culture. (297-98)

The historical princely kingdom that Ngangom refers to is the royal dynastic heritage of Manipur which was overrun by the British. During the monarchial tradition of governance Manipur's indigenous roots speak of an in depth link to their land historically documented as Kangleipak. However, prior to the British rule in 1709, Maharaja Gharib Nawaz, with the guidance of his Bengali mentor Shanti Das Goswami, issued an edict imposing Hinduism as Manipur's new religion. This move aimed to suppress the indigenous faith and culture of the region. The king took deliberate actions such as introducing the Bengali script, demolishing places of indigenous worship, prohibiting local rituals, and replacing burial with cremation to erase the natives' history. Kishan Thingnam Singh in his article "Encounters and Literary Engagements – A Critique of History and Literature in Manipur" (2011) presents the dilemma faced by the common Meitei who has been confronted with a socio-religious culture that is considered foreign to the native people of Manipur.

> Apart from the historical importance of this clash between the indigenous Meetei faith and the alien Hindu faith, the nature of its impact of the collective experience of the people and its culture needs careful scrutiny, as it was not actually an encounter in terms of tradition and modernity. It was essentially an encounter between two pre-modern, traditional cultures, two traditional world-views." (143-44)

As such the entry of Hinduism into Manipur especially the Imphal valley among the Meiteis has a violent historical account associated with it. Singh further discusses the Britishers contact with the Manipuris with a modern civilization, which led to the introduction of Christianity to hills of Manipur, also has violence embedded within it.

> The second has been the encounter with the Western civilization vis-à-vis the British conquest of Manipur in 1891…it was historically an encounter between traditional and a modern cultural system. (144)

In 1891, the Anglo-Manipuri War unfolded as Manipuris clashed with British forces in response to the killing of numerous British officers. The Manipuris succumbed to the superior British force armed with modern weaponry. Prior to this conflict, Manipur had stood as an independent state, but after the war in 1891, it fell under British rule. The arrival of missionaries accompanied this period, fostering the spread of Christianity in the hills where the Nagas and Kukis reside. However, one must be cognizant to the fact that modernization in the case of the Manipuri literature did not occur as a result of British missionaries influence in the region as it was in the hills of Manipur. Tilottoma Misra highlights that it was the indigenous Meitei identity movements that contributed to the modernization of Manipuri literature.

> It is significant, therefore, that the birth of modernism in Manipuri literature in the early years of the twentieth century was not marked by the missionary enterprise of translating Christian texts and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, but by the growing awareness of the indigenous Meitei identity which had been suppressed during the rule of the Manipuri kings who had offered active patronage to the alien Vaishnava culture." ("Crossing Linguistic" xxiii)

In fact Ngangom's book of poems, *Words and the Silence* which was published in the year 1988, has a reference to the historical past of native roots through 'Kangleipak' in the poem "I am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains." Here the allusion to 'poetry being in chains' can be understood to speak of how one's indigeneity has been overrun by external forces, Maharaja Gharib Nawaz's attempt of cleansing indigenous elements, the colonial British rule over the Manipuris and the influence of the postcolonial Indian state after the departure of the British.

> The heart is a toy
> broken a long time ago.
> In Kangleipak we do not think
> of the past or a future.
> We only make sure our thinking
> has some semblance of sanity,
> we only ensure that our limbs are intact. (lines 27-33)

The loss of traditional values, rootlessness, dispossession, fragmentation of homes and family and the threat to one's identity and culture are worrying for the poet as exterior forces have disrupted the possibility of an alternative account of indigeneity associated with the glorious past of Manipur from being realized. The past glory of Kangleipak engenders a sense of nostalgic longing for the past, where tradition and values were intact, roots were firm, ownership unperturbed, homes were abodes for families, and identity and culture were preserved. In the same poem "I am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains" all of the above are reminiscent of the 'Kangleipak' that once was.

> In this small patch of land,
> forgotten by history, isolated by nine ranges,
> in ignorant bliss Kangleipak lives.
> Once prime land, beneficent and fabled. (lines 34-37)

This past land of Kangleipak is treated like a land that exists only in the imagination now. It is a country that breathes and lives only in a space that the mind's eye can access. What is present before the poet in the real world, the physical extent of the knowable, is a twisted bundle of confused and troubled spaces. Ngangom's poem "A Country" from *Words and the Silence* speaks of "and the stranglehold of a country/that lives only in the mind" (lines 31-32). There is an enormous sense of cultural loss that fills the poetry of Ngangom. The native land of the poet is innately connected to his heart and memory and deeply feels the need to connect to that past of the people of Manipur. Inhabitants of Manipur are inarguably concerned about the protection and preservation of their land, indigenous culture, identity and language. Ngangom describes the way in which external elements come to threaten their very nativity in "The Lost Generation of Manipur" from the collection of poems in *Words and the Silence*.

> They came riding the trains of night
> with knives sheaved in their hearts,
> fire in their menacing hands,
> to manipulate figures of loot
> at their penpoints,
> They came with unkind words,
> sly uncommon leers,

to make huge bonfires
of their ancestral granaries,
to make the ground reel under their weight,
to rob the poor to denudation. (lines 29-39)

In the poem "Arms will Flower Here Too" published in *Time's Crosswords*, the poet Ngangom explores the notion of how the Manipuri populace has lost the sense of home being associated with their land. He compares the experience to that of being a mere traveler in one's own ancestral space; like an unwelcome guest at one's very own home. For a certain section of the Manipuri population, "India was a 'foreign oppressor' that took away Manipur's sovereignty. Their national territory was under the control of the 'occupying Indian forces', and the natives were oppressed" (Devi 210). Once again the dichotomy of insider versus outsider is vehemently revealed in the following passages. Anup Shekar Chakraborty opines that "…migration across the new frontiers facilitated by the colonial state resulted in demographic changes and 'fear of the other'…" (9).

When the strangers arrived
they carried no guns, spears or swords;
they are not fighting men
for they speak only with flowers,
these patient burrowers who wanted them
to go on dancing and singing and
change them into gypsies in their own land. (lines 4-10)

In "From, 'The Book of Grievances'" from Ngangom's *Time's Crossroads*, the poet bemoans the tragic state of affairs in Manipur. This 'book of grievances' is replete with a sense of tremendous loss and pain; loss of tradition and touch with one's roots. "From here the day weeps in the fading light/ and the evenings are misty-eyed" (bk.1, lines 1-2). The people are overcome by the inability to exercise their cherished values as unfamiliar norms disrupt their indigeneity. "The hills remain unmoved/with a reputation of silence/and none knows of our dreams" (bk. 1, lines 6-8). The angst that the poet expresses is a condition of hopelessness that hangs over the people like a dark menacing cloud. "But something is already dead/something like hope, and dreams" (bk. 1, lines 14-15). The following lines perhaps present this sense of disconnect and loss with their roots and ancestry more vividly.

What is tradition and our history
But death with a long memory
For how long will we make
our forefathers walk as ghosts?
. . . . . .
Today as East meets West in the hills
our blind arterial roots grope
under the earth. (bk.1, lines 27-30, bk.2, lines 53-55)

In the poem "The Ignominy of Geometry" from *The Desire of Roots* presents this dichotomy between the mainstream Indian society and the region. The poetics of difference that unfolds between the center and Manipur reveals itself in how a lack of understanding of the Meitei way of life becomes the Manipuri self's experience of the center's "One minute of patronizing certainty" (line 6). He goes on to further allude to the problem of not being able to see eye to eye because of the obvious differences.

or, when two people cannot agree (naturally)
they are diametrically opposed,
bowing again to geometry,
a language of precision
to measure our imprecise lives.
. . . . . .
The ignominy of geometry,
the inability to see beyond centers and triangles. (lines 12-16, 27-28).

Amarjeet and Sanaiyama in their article "Politics of Counter-insurgency and the Expansion of Security Bureaucracy" (2021) explain that the "…root causes of insurgency are varied which differ from case to case in which the resentments over the 'merger' into the Indian Union, fear of Bengali immigration and cultural distinctiveness are the predominant ones" (149). The controversy around the invocation of AFSPA 1958 in Manipur and other parts of the North-east, including Nagaland and Mizoram, has been a matter of critical concern. The special powers and the impunity it grants to the army is notorious for the humanitarian and civilian atrocities that have unfolded in the region.

The genesis of political unrest and subsequent armed conflicts between state and armed opposition groups (AOGs) has been largely traced in

> this argument. The relationship between Manipur and India has been defined as antagonistic. (Devi 209)

The biopolitical management of the people of Manipur has resulted in the creation of a state of exception. It brings into account and focus the notions of Agamben's use of the terms *bios* and *zoé* within the Manipuri context. The questions around a politically valued life vis-à-vis one that is rendered a bare and simple life in Manipur's relationship with its center at New Delhi. The Manipuri lives at the peripheral region of the North-east of India as in the case of Nagas and Mizos are lives that are not qualified, simple and bare lives – not qualified enough to reflect the Indian state's *bios*. The civil society in Manipur has often raised its voice against imposition of AFSPA 1958 because of what they allege is the misuse of military powers to commit crimes on civilians. Ngangom provides an account of an incident from July 15, 2004, where twelve middle-aged women staged a naked protest outside the Kangla fort in his poem "Everywhere I Go…" published in *The Desire of Roots*. They held a banner that read, "Indian Army, rape us too, We are all Manorama Mothers," in response to the brutal rape of Thangjam Manorama by the Assam Rifle Force. Manorama had been taken from her home for questioning under suspicion of involvement with an insurgent group. Tragically, her body was discovered on July 11, 2004, showing signs of multiple rapes and gunshot wounds to her genitals. This gruesome incident sparked the protest as a form of resistance against humiliation and violence. Widely known as the Naked Women Protest or Kangla Protest of 2004, the poet expresses ongoing anticipation for justice in Manorama's murder.

> And I want to tell my poet-friends
> of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves
> and asked soldiers to rape them.
> In fact, I make imaginary journeys
> To its little world every day
> and wait for the fog of justice to lift. (lines 16-21)

Interestingly, Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* makes references to the opposition and resistance against AFSPA by the women of Manipur. Mose and Neituo discuss the similarities of the conditions between the state of Nagaland and Manipur, "Why don't we join the Manipuris? They have been protesting for a long time to have it lifted" (169). Mose and Neituo, respresentative of the common Naga, are not at all

distanced from the conditions in the state of Manipur which impacts the Meitei community. To the question, "Have the Manipuris made any headway?" (170) asked by Mose, Neituo responds:

> Not that I know of. One just reads about it in the papers, but I must say it's very brave of their women to spearhead it. The young activist Irom Sharmila, is already one year into her hunger fast. You know that she was arrested and charged with attempt to commit suicide? That's all the government can come up with. I have such admiration for the Manipuri women. (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 170)

The resistance and protest against AFSPA 1958 by the Meitei women takes place in the most outrageous manner as the Indian state's use of it "…makes way for a discourse of military and war into everyday legal procedures, thereby normalizing an otherwise emergency exercise" (Chubatila 192). Such forms of legalization and attempts to normalization creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and risks in the everyday activities of the people as the habitual presence of the military creates a "zone of anomie" (Agamben, *State of* 50). A state of exception where the rule of law does not apply and life and death remain suspended and people are filled with hatred and resentment. Amarjeet and Sanaiyama discuss how "…AFSPA is questionable because insurgency never ends and peace never comes; two, it is an act that supplants rather than supplements civilian authority" (162).

In the select works of Ngangom, the reference to religion is nominal and he appears to find greater comfort in poetic expressions of the loss, pain and contradictions of the life around him. Poetry, for the poet, in a way may be interpreted to perform the sacred task of providing solutions to the many complexities of life. However, Ngangom does touch upon religious symbols in his poetic articulations, but unlike Kire and Jacob whose characters and poetry reflect a deep engagement with God through descriptions associated with the church, references to biblical passages, imageries surrounding the birth of Christ and the importance of prayers, they appear to serve only as a background to provide a context to his poetic inspirations. In his poem, "Sunday, Monday" from *Time's Crossroads* the observation of Sunday is addressed rather nonchalantly and the reference to the preacher, the good book and girls speak of his impressions of a Sunday church service. He makes skeptical and inquisitive statements about the practice of making confessions for one's sins saying

"Which fool does not regret his past? The once-happy/man regrets the end of happiness. The sorrowing man/ rues those squandered nights" (lines 16-18). He further stresses on how a Sunday just passes by "Again a Sunday of cheap memory and disabled time" (line 15). Ngangom's pessimism in religion and God finds a bold mention through his poetic expressions. It is as though he has lost all faith in the possibilities of the existence of a God who can answer the pain and prayers of his people. In the poem "Janmashtami, 7th September 1983" found in *Words and the Silence* which celebrates the birth of Krishna in the Hindu tradition, there are scenes evocative of temple imageries marking an overall celebratory occasion.

> visions of lotus seeds
> and crisp garlands, balloons,
> and happy puppets
> never left alone; and
> rising before cockcrow
> to be among the first
> who make offerings. (lines 1-7)

However, Ngangom's skepticism soon breaks through when he alludes to the nature of mankind and how the innocence of a young boy developing into a full-grown man alters one's perception about life; and about the divine nature of God. The impatience of the young to acquire knowledge about life and the endeavor of the elderly to erase past memories from theirs make them religiously offer prayers. But a man in his prime, the poet Ngangom believes, develops the knowledge and wisdom to deal with life's predicaments without Godly assistance or intervention.

> things have occurred –
> forgotten too.
> the boy of yesteryear,
> with all his fears,
> walks as a man today, and
> no longer requires temples. (lines 12-17)

Ironically, Ngangom in another poem, "Prayer to the One Who Sleeps Above" from *Time's Crossroads* seems to suggest that God is not interested in his miserable plight as a mere mortal on earth. He highlights what he has committed himself to in the worship of his deity "I knelt on the stones/ of your abandoned temples/flagellated

myself/for your ears alone" (lines 12-15). However, he does not consider himself to be in a favoured position and he calls out to the "One Who Sleeps Above" to awaken, "Only make sure now, master,/ I do not debase myself/ before the ones/ you have favoured on earth" (lines 32-35). Ngangom's poetry belongs to that category of poetry in the North-east that speaks about the angst and suffering of the people brought about by the many years of armed struggle and conflicts. It is aptly summed up by Thingnam Kishan Singh when he highlights that, "…intensification of the armed struggle, ensuing conflict and the endless battles fought all over the land of Manipur have made profound impact on contemporary literature. Poetry especially has plunged deep into this conflict and the experience it has produced over the years" (155).

To conclude, Tilottoma Misra alludes that attempts to coercively homogenize the North-east did not end with the departure of the British from India as the postcolonial Indian state took over that responsibility from the erstwhile colonizers.

> This agenda of 'integrating' a region with the 'mainstream' by imposing a language and a literature which is totally different from the spoken language of the people is one of the characteristic strategies of all modern empire-builders, and the story did not come to an end in Northeast India with the end of colonialism. ("Speaking, Writing" 18-19)

The representative voices both of *darstellen* and *vertreten* have been discussed in the context of the Nagas, Mizos, and Manipuris and as such the self's interior recognition through the select writers reflects an essentialist, positivist and foundationalist perspective of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei identities. It is representative of the indigenous voices of the region that stands conspicuously against the external gaze of the Indian mainstream.

> [A]ttempts at 'national integration' are bound to meet with a great deal of resistance from these people, especially if attempts are made to override ethnic diversity and impose a homogenous set of values. (Misra, *India's North-east* 85)

An external gaze prominently defined by a fixed and essentialist definition of who an Indian is or what constitutes the definition of Indianness. It is an impasse that is produced by the inability to respond to differences in a manner that is inclusive; a poetics of differences that is unable to accommodate distinctions of race, genealogy,

culture, customs, language, religion etc. within the scope of its definition. Anthony Giddens directs one's attention to the way in which there is an externally driven prescriptive approach, where people are placed under "…preconstructed settings rather than able to subject their lives to the sway of their own self-understanding" (250)

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Chapter IV

Breaking the Impasse

This chapter attempts to unravel the deadlock that results from the essentialist, positivist and foundationalist perspectives that are strongly associated with both the mainstream Indian identity vis-à-vis the North-east identities of the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. Neither identity of the mainstream Indian or North-east Indian self fits into the absolute categorization of the defined construct of the other, in effect, resulting in the presence of an undeniable impasse. It would be apt to highlight Lyotard's concept of the *différend* which is an irresolvable dispute where consensus is elusive. In fact Macey goes on to say that "A *différend* cannot be resolved; at best, a partial resolution can be negotiated" (237). Husserl's theoretical concepts around phenomenology will be explored against the provisions of the select works of the present study. The chapter attempts to apply Husserl's concepts of phenomenology to ultimately arrive at the essence of a given experience and identity–in effect enabling circumstances that provide an understanding of what constitutes the essence of the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri conflict vis-à-vis the Indian state. The chapter also attempts to achieve its objectives of resolving the deadlock through reiteration of postmodernist theoretical enquiries into the ideological foundations of essentialist, positivist and foundationalist thoughts of the Indian grand narrative which inform the push towards and favor homogeneity. It will further attempt to examine the Indian state's own prerogatives of nation building and how it finds itself oppositionally situated against the prerogatives of regional identities like those of the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. How the need for nation-building exercise is fundamental towards keeping the Indian nation state together and how differences potentially could lead to the balkanization of the country. As such "identity politics" (Bernstein 52) that stress on differences and distinctiveness from the mainland Indian identity therefore is rendered parochial, suspect and untenable. To this effect, the Indian state's push towards uniformity and homogeneity stresses on assimilation as being desirable for minority cultural identities who by "changing one's mind" may "change one's identity" (Moya, *Learning from* 120). It will examine the premise that changing of one's identity is a socially constructed process which is for the benefit of the minority group and also for the Indian nation at large. The postmodernist stance of one's identity constantly evolving, being unstable and negotiable promotes and enables this line of thought around new identity

formations and the benefits of assimilation**.** However, the denial of some critical aspects of one's identity that is embedded in the reality of one's social, political and epistemic location such as race is bound to act as an impediment. "This is because all identities, including racial ones, are inescapably relational: to know ourselves as *selves* requires us to know ourselves in relation to *others*" (Moya, *Learning from* 110). The theoretical considerations of the postpositivist realists present us with an in depth critical analysis of the "reality" (Moya, *Learning from* 27) of the socially constructed experiences in which the North-east states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur are situated or located. Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom provide representational accounts of the lived-experiences of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis enabling one to enquire into the interpretative frameworks by which experiences and identity must unequivocally be grounded on the reality of one's historical and social location. This establishes the presence of a poetics of difference in mainstream India's relationship with North-east India and subsequently the need to ethically recognize the reality of the disparate and diverse attributes of India's social and cultural composition.

Husserl's contributions to the field of phenomenology is considered to be an outgrowth of Kant's concept of *noumena* which means *things in themselves* and *phenomena* which are *things as they appear to the mind*. Though the pure phenomenology of Husserl is not about psychology proper it does not alter the fact that it has to do with consciousness and the associated mental processes which subsequently leads to acts of perceiving. Husserl stresses on the way one's perceptions about the way one sees the world is often grounded in what he calls the "natural attitude" (Zahavi 51).

> That we set aside all hitherto prevailing habits of thinking, that we recognize and tear down intellectual barrier with which they confine the horizon of our thinking and now, with full freedom of thought, seize upon the genuine philosophical problems to be set completely anew…..
> (Husserl *General Introduction* xix)

This natural attitude according to Husserl must be questioned, it is in effect a questioning of what was previously taken for granted. In other words, he suggests that one must wonder at what appears to be most familiar – the ability to look at the world with "new eyes" (Schmitt 29). Husserl directs one's attention to "the critique of knowledge" with the end objective of locating "…absolutely bare, presuppositionless

data on which to build the whole knowledge; more precisely, the problem is to intuit the essence of knowledge…" (Husserl *The Idea* xv). The need to re-examine stereotypes, constructs and presuppositions held about the North-east in mainstream India, specifically about the Naga, Mizo and Meitei contexts, cannot be overlooked. It is closely associated with Husserl's reference to "prevailing habits of thinking" that creates a barrier towards adopting an intellectual approach to the construction of knowledge. He further stresses on the need to arrive at the essence of the object in question by attempting "…to locate pure data, themselves independent of all presuppositions and logically adequate for the critical reconstruction of knowledge" (Husserl *The Idea* xv). Moreover, the problems are further accentuated by the role of perspectival nature of experience and construction of knowledge. The natural attitude of mind does not critically engage with the process of knowledge acquisition or the act of cognition readily. It more often than not relies heavily on the limited perspectives that one has already acquired leading to misconceptions, misinterpretations and misrepresentations of knowledge.

> We find expression for what immediate experience presents…we draw inferences from the directly experienced (perceived or remembered) to *what is not experienced*. We generalize, and then apply again general knowledge to particular cases or deduce analytically new generalizations from general knowledge. (Husserl *The Idea* 15)

These acts of misconceptions, misinterpretations and misrepresentations about the Naga, Mizo or Meitei context warrants the dire need for authentic representative voices that can improve generalized opinions into well-founded knowledge. As such, the relevance of Spivak's emphasis on enabling the subaltern's to speak and articulate the essence of the lived-experiences and in extension that of the people of the North-east. Kire's, Jacob's and Ngangom's representational acts of speech, however, will only be meaningful if the above said misrepresentations are understood for what they really are. To this effect, there is a need to gain clarity around the concept of what Husserl means by the "essence" of a given object or condition. Subsequently, one may extrapolate Husserl's clarification of the same as the need for, "…absolute and clear givenness, self-givenness in the absolute sense…a simply immediate "seeing" and apprehending of the intended object as it is…" (Husserl *The Idea* 28). In order to arrive at the "self-givenness" or "essence" of the object or condition, Husserl further

discusses need to "bracket out" (Husserl *The Idea* xix) existing knowledge or understanding that one has already acquired, in other words, efforts must be made to remove what may potentially be the biased influence of the "natural attitude" (Zahavi 51). The violent conflicts in the North-east, both of the past and the contemporary times, are naturally assumed to be a result of the flawed nature of the temperament associated with people groups like the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. Easterine Kire suggests that the stereotypes and presuppositions are "constructed identity" ("Writing from" 12) and there is need to re-construct identities of people from the perspective of an insider and one should not remain confined within externally constructed notions of identities. This process of re-construction should eliminate existing modes of "seeing" which does not allow the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris to come to terms with their own indigeneity – need to protect their respective ways of life. The disparate nature of violence has overwhelmed the region often diverting the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris from truly engaging with what may be defined as the "self-givenness" or "essence" of the conflict between the region vis-à-vis mainland India – the protection of the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri way of life. In other words, the fear of being assimilated and loss of one's cultural roots to externally defined norms and values which are driven by a significant poetics of difference.

In an interview to the Swati Daftuar on 11th February 2013, Kire elaborately answers the question on how the novel *Bitter Wormwood* was conceptualized; stating that it is about "real people and their lives" (Daftuar "For Easterine"). She alludes to the interviews she had conducted to gain insight into the experiences of the times in question. On unveiling details about the novel she adds that it is "the story of the two grandsons of the two soldiers meeting up and striking up a deep friendship is not *untrue*" (Daftuar "For Easterine"). One of the two soldiers, the protagonist of the novel is Mose whose character is based on the life of her uncle who was a soldier in the Naga Army. The other soldier Himmat Singh whose character is drawn from Harivallabh Joshi who was posted to the Naga Hills in the early 1960s and provided Kire with details of his accounts of having served there. All these factual details contribute to the novel being what Kire has defined as falling under the category of a "historical fiction" (Daftuar "For Easterine"). Though *Life on Hold* does not make provisions of the kind of historical details as those associated with the five appendices attached to the novel, *Bitter Wormwood*, the historical backdrop against which the

characters and their circumstances unfold are undeniable. Roko and Nime's ill-fated love story is characterized around the conditions prevailing during the Naga war of independence from India. Unlike *Bitter Wormwood* it does not span across three generations of the history of Nagas but brings one to contact with a more contemporary Nagaland and its disconnect from the original cause of fighting for an independent Nagaland to protect the Naga way of life. In *Life on Hold*, the personal level of discourse becomes political as the miserable conditions of the lives surrounding the two protagonists, who are unable to marry each other, and how the grim realities of their lives cruelly forces them apart. The socio-political backdrop against which these grim realities are grounded depict a serious deviation from the original cause fraught with an assortment of encounters against the Indian army, factional encounters and a life of extortions faced by the common man. Every prominent character in the novella is impacted by the prevailing troubled conditions of the times, that Kire draws one's attention to, where the precariousness of life and living are made highly pronounced. Even, in *Bitter Wormwood* there is reference to the new generation of freedom fighters who are divided into factions extorting money from the civilians and disrupting peaceful community life amongst the Nagas themselves. The more serious cases are those where Nagas kill their own people and the Naga war of independence with India becomes distorted by the day with the original cause gradually dying out. Cherrie L. Chhangte highlights how the North-east people's "…struggles constitute a part of each of their very recent histories, and where, as a result, stories and songs and various lores have emerged, reflecting the experiences of entire generations of people…" (237).

Easterine Kire's depiction of the "people's stories" (Daftuar "For Easterine") provides for perspectives that present the experiences of the Naga's as they unfold in the lives of the characters in the select works. These characters are grounded in the real lives of "real people" (Kire "FAQ") that are yoked together, sometimes violently, by the realities of the social and political location of their times. In *Bitter Wormwood* Mose's represents a whole group of young men who are impelled by conditions and circumstances that governed their lives to take active part in the struggle for Naga independence. A fairly bright young student, eager to learn, "Mose liked school and was a quick learner which pleased his teachers a lot. This boy will go far…" (24). The natural course of Mose's life was to become well-educated man and serve the interests of the Naga society. Even, within the family Mose grew up to be a caring young boy

loved by both his mother Vilaü and grandmother Khrienuo who bring him up with great care. He is intelligent enough to perceive that his mother and grandmother were dependent on him to be the man of the house after the untimely accidental death of his father. He is very well involved and aware of the agrarian nature of their family life and chips in assisting in the field and farm work too. “They had a good harvest that year. Mose diligently counted 33 tins of paddy” (41). He did not shy away from helping in the domestic works as he understood the nature of daily physical work that his mother and grandmother are often engaged in to support his education. “Mother, I don’t mind doing women’s work if it helps you a little. Besides no one is going to see” (44).

Neither Mose nor Vilaü nor Khrienuo could possibly have predicted the unexpected course of events that were to overwhelm their traditional and ordinary lives. Mose joins the war of Naga independence after the world around him as he understood it to be began to alter drastically. The death of his father was a result of an accident; however his beloved grandmother’s innocent life being abruptly cut short because of an Indian army’s bullet is of a different kind and arouses the Naga identity consciousness in him. To further add to the strong indigenous emotions of his Naganess, as a young adolescent he is witness to the atrocities and violence that the Naga civilians in his village are compelled to go through at the hands of the Indian army.

> The missing woman had been raped and murdered and decapitated. There was great anger at her funeral. Men spoke loudly of revenge and no one quieted them because this had never happened before. The soldiers who had done it made no secret of their crime. (82)

The conditions and circumstances that has led to Mose and Neituo to this point of their life is absolutely dumbfounding. Things have more than become “crazy” in their immediate experiences, perhaps experiences that as young adolescents they should not have been exposed to. The realities of their lives as Nagas have compelled them to engage in unbelievable but undeniable violent truths about their circumstances.

> [R]uthless and intensive state repression followed, marked by violent state actions, exterminations using fake encounters, forced disappearances, militarization, …acts have caused more hatred,

> mistrust and anti-India sentiment, and have provided more justification for the self-determination struggle. (Thounoujam 68)

The Indian army's operations are all interpreted by the civilian populations as criminal acts committed against the Nagas. It is perceived as an attempt by the Indian army to threaten and wipe out the very existence of the Naga people. As such, the invocation of sentiments of resentment and the need to protect and defend the Naga way of life takes place. It appears as though the idea of Naganess is endangered and the conflict takes a violent turn as the Nagas take up arms against the Indian state. The Indian army's operations against the Nagas, underground and civilians alike, to protect the security of the Indian state and nation was perceived by the Naga self to be acts of unrestrained brutal and heartless violence perpetrated on the people of Nagaland. Husserl discusses how one's consciousness is often driven by only a certain perspective about a given object or situation. There is a tendency to derive conclusively from partial and incomplete knowledge which can have a permanent impact on the psyche of the people. While the truth is to get "…an approximate presentation of the entire object…" one needs to have a far greater knowledge about the different aspects of that object or situation, however, "…the experience itself appears immediately in its totality" (Zahavi 47). As such, the Naga civilian population's experience of the Indian army and its operations is perceived as a threat to the idea of Naga existence from his own perspective. This makes the Naga assume that the Indian army is out to threaten their existence which in turn makes them take up arms to protect their ancestral homeland.

Many years later after Vilaü's death, Mose is settled down, has his own family, and lives an ordinary life while earning a living through a grocery shop. There are incidents related to extortions and factional killings that begin to take place actively as the underground movements become more divisive and complicated. Neituo assesses the scenario in Nagaland where Nagas killing Nagas becomes the trend of the days. "I am quite sure it's the end of our Naga cause. When you begin to kill each other, you no longer have a cause left, do you? You have as good as destroyed your own cause" (143). Mose's wife Neilhounuo goes on to lament that factionalism not only creates more crime because there are many bogus members but also because of a number of jobless young men joining the factions and extorting money. All this creates an atmosphere of fear and distrust in the people's lives. "I mean, we have had war with

India hanging over our heads all our lives. But to have our own men killing each other, and terrorizing us is unbearable" (164). Seram Guneshwori Devi discusses in her article "The Victimization of People in Conflict Ridden Zone: Manipur and Nagaland" how writers in the North-east deal with conditions that "…are within the realm of the human; their concern is with the lives of ordinary people who are caught in the socio-political conflict with no choice of their own" (93). A process of terrorization unfolds the way in which civilians, government employees or business men are placed under duress to pay what factions call collection of taxes which is twenty-five percent of their monthly earnings. And ironically, this coercive act of being made to pay taxes at gunpoint is projected as civilian aid to insurgent groups by the national media like the *Indian Express* based out of an Indian metropolis. Neituo expresses his angst at the way in which national newspapers are manipulated to present only one side of the Naga predicament. "The journalist had reported that the Naga insurgents actively received help from the civilian population who donated money to their cause. He flung the paper down in disgust" (164). Chubatila discusses the way in which "…everyday lives of people had been gripped with fear and terror, their mobility had been restricted and their daily activities had been suspended" (172-73). The reality of the lives of common people is that they are constantly threatened by the Indian army, factions fighting for the original cause, other breakaway factions, extortionists and jobless young men.

In *Life on Hold* Roko, the main protagonist of the novella is introduced as a young school going boy who often hangs around with his friends Nime, a girl and Setuo, a boy. He is a born leader and always wants to win at everything. His personality makes him stand out and gain the attention of all around him. Like Mose from *Bitter Wormwood*, Roko is a bright young boy and the teachers at his school recognize him for his brilliance which also includes extra-curricular involvements of leading parades and playing the drums for the junior band. Nime and Setuo are his ardent followers and always take their cues from Roko. However, unlike Mose's character Roko comes from a rather broken family from a mother who made a living out of the liquor business and a father who was an alcoholic. Despite these challenges one would assume that Roko has a bright future ahead of him because of his personality and talent. However, around the time of his school days in the latter part of the 1980s, factional killings increased heavily and the war of Naga independence began to assume a very different

position. While there were factions that continued to remain faithful to the Naga cause without any compromise many, Naga underground members, began to deviate from the honorable fight of Naga independence. Nime's mother comments that "…we are seeing something we have never seen before. These men are different. They are ruthless and kill readily" (19). Though these factional groups claimed that they were fighting the Indian army for the Naga freedom struggle they did not inspire the confidence of the general public, "…they were quickly establishing a reign of fear through the brutal killings of fellow Nagas who opposed them" (19-20). While these accounts of factional brutalities caused unspeakable fear and trauma in the general public; Roko still continues to be infatuated by the role of national workers in the struggle for Naga independence. All the bitter realities of the factional atrocities on civilians could not hold back Roko from aspiring to fight for a free Nagaland and his conversations ran endlessly to bear evidence of his commitment to the original cause.

Here Husserl's intentionality occupies an important place in discerning the nature of experiences that are at play. The fact that the experiences of the Naga people, or specifically in this case as represented by the protagonists in *Bitter Wormwood* and *Life on Hold*, at large is characterized by a "consciousness of something" because "one does not merely love, fear, see, or judge, one loves a beloved, fears something fearful, sees an object and a judges a state of affairs" (Zahavi 14). Nime's assessment of the conditions surrounding the Naga struggle for independence began to change and she became only fearful of the struggle; no longer being fascinated. Nime was able to make quite a fair assessment between the national workers of today and those who had fought for Naga freedom in the past. She no longer saw a honorable fight in the way Nagas have begun to harass other Nagas to the point of killing them.

> There was a great difference between the new generation of soldiers and the former lot. Nime's neighbour uncle Milto, was a veteran of the first Naga army. He was ten years older than her father. Uncle Milto was in his 60s now and his stories were different from the ones told today. "We fought a different war. We had only one enemy. That was the Indian army. Today, they have more than one enemy. The worst is that brothers are killing each other. That has made the war so complex. When you are fighting the Indian army one night, but being shot at by your own people the next night, it doesn't make sense any more," Milto

> would comment. He was referring to all the factional killings which had been going on for the past ten years. (35)

Uncle Milto's generation of the Naga war of independence is without any doubt the same generation as of Mose and Neituo from *Bitter Wormwood*. It was the generation that mourned the creation of the state of Nagaland. The declaration of the state of Nagaland in 1963 came as a deafening shock to Milto's and Mose's generation who considered the development as a major compromise to the freedom struggle. However, for Roko the dream of fighting for the freedom of the homeland never subsided he continued to nurture an intense passion for the original cause. He was also disillusioned by the corrupt state government and the nexus of nepotism which did not provide for a fair opportunity to prospective young job seekers. As Roko decides to join the underground his friends Nime and Setuo attempt to dissuade him but it is all in vain because his mind is made up. Setuo says "You know they shoot deserters." "I don't intend to desert" is Roko's blunt response (28).

> Nime remembered how he had talked about fighting for an independent Nagaland. He would get very angry at the ruling government and say that Nagaland needed to be rid of all the corruption that was part of the state government. "The only thing they listen to is a gun," he would say. That sort of talk from the boys terrified Nime, but she never really thought that they would carry it out for real. Roko had. (35)

Though Nime was attracted to Roko and she nurtured deep feelings for him she could not hold him back from his commitment to the Naga cause. The freedom struggle which had become grossly distorted no longer inspired the trust of a huge majority of the Naga population including Nime. Caroline S. Hau on addressing the question of artistic representation of the conditions of those that need to be spoken for highlights that it is "…the artist's obligation to speak for others, to express through the work of art the hopes, aspirations, and experiences of 'the people' (i.e., to represent the people both politically and semiotically)" (134). Kire here brings to the fore the experiences of the Naga people in the struggle through difficult times described in a rather vivid manner. The webs of intricate violence and mental torture completely twist the lives of the protagonists into a set of deeply disturbing conditions. The questions of fidelity towards the original cause but more importantly what had become of the original cause. It was gradually getting overwhelmed and lost in the everyday

circumstances of the life of ordinary Nagas. For Nime the most obvious and pertinent aspect of the present Naga imbroglio was defined by the so called national workers who have been crippling men like her father, Pusalie's businesses. Pusalie was working hard to keep his family life together but bit by bit everything he sets out to commit himself to all runs aground. Nime as such hates the circumstance and conditions brought about by the Naga struggle which have pinned down her father and taken away Roko from her. "The stupid national movement, is more important to him than me. She had never spoken rudely of the Naga struggle before and she was shocked at how sacrilegious she sounded" (42). What Nime is going through here may be mistaken for a thoughtless act of dismissing the Naga struggle and its sanctity. In fact to be legitimately critical of the Naga movement makes Nime feel guilty even if it is just for a moment. But a closer examination of her statement within the context of her experience reveals that the Naga cause has been reduced to something akin to a drunken brawl. Somewhere amidst all those who depicted fidelity to the original cause, the Indian military operations, extortions, factionalisms, Nagas killing Nagas and her own family's dire circumstances she feels it has become a mindless chaotic mess of a struggle. And truth be told what Nime and her family have gone through, in terms of pain and suffering, is epic in proportions and perhaps that gives her all the right to be critical of a struggle which is becoming more muddled as each day passes by.

Moreover, the language of fear and of being under constant watch that the two men in Nime's life display is evidence to where the state of affairs is heading to in the state of Nagaland. Both men are always looking out and on guard for the fear of being heard or seen by an ever-threatening presence that appears to looms large over their heads. When Nime calls out his name in the marketplace at Kohima, Roko reacts by pulling her aside into the shadows of the alleyways, "They have eyes everywhere" (38). "Life is more complicated than that. The enemy are everywhere Nime…" (40). In the case of Pusalie, he returns early from work one day and insists that everyone only communicate in whispers, "Shh..shh..not so loud, boy, they have ears everywhere" (47). The hotel owner where Pusalie was staying described Nime's father's behavior as odd and disruptive, "…he was disturbing the other guests by going around warning people to speak low else they would be all killed" (47). Nime finds out that her father's behavior and conduct demanding that everyone whisper in the house takes an unprecedented psychological toll on her as well.

> Once, when Nime was out in the shop buying some salt, she caught herself whispering to the salesman. Alarmed, she was more cautious when she left the house after that. This illness of Father's had taken its toll on all of them in different ways. (56)

In *Bitter Wormwood* When Rakesh a classmate and friend of Mose's grandson Neibou visits Nagaland, well into the new millennium, one of the behavior of the Nagas that strikes him is, "the way people spoke carefully, measuring their words if they were talking about the conflict, the way they wanted to appear neutral and not part of it, not siding any group" (221). Eventually, both Roko's and Pusalie's lives are lost as a result of the conflicts, rivalries and enmities that have cropped up between the various factions. Husserl's work in the field of phenomenology delves on the need to enquire into the essence of the object of enquiry or event. The phenomenological approach as such attempts to set aside all preconceived notions of the "natural attitude" (Zahavi 51) by "suspending" (Zahavi 51) or "bracketing" (Zahavi 62) all knowledge that directs one's consciousness to the nonessential characteristics of the object or event; one that is driven by the natural attitude. The layers of knowledge that distract one from acquiring first-person experience of the reality must be bracketed. It is a philosophical approach that attempts to get back to the "self-givenness" (Husserl *The Idea* 28) of the objects and conditions of the Naga conflict. The natural attitude about the North-east of India, to be more specific the state of Nagaland, in this case, is one projected by the constructed knowledge, stereotypes, and presuppositions that have been built over the decades about the Naga disturbance. The heavy militarization of the region is openly sanctioned and justified by the Indian state in that the people groups of the North-east are always up and arms against the idea of India. In this one-sided process of engaging with the North-east, people groups like the Nagas and their roots and indigeneity have been trampled upon without any regards and respect for the differences and sentiments of the people. The natural attitude or presupposition assumes unquestionable conformity to prescriptive definitions of postcolonial nationalism thereby ignoring the indigeneity of the people that is distinct from the Indian canon. In a phenomenological enquiry there is a need to question what was previously taken for granted, with a change of attitude and with a pair of new eyes. The Naga essence embedded and buried under circumstances and conditions brought about by the use of military might, violence, and bloodshed in the conflict very often

remains unseen. The idea of an Indo-centric modular nationalism that is forced on the people of Nagaland by even Prime Minister Nehru, who had spoken in the most benevolent terms of wanting to develop the North-east in accordance with their own "natural genius" (Misra, "Crossing Linguistic" 220) is quite a contradiction. Husserl's theoretical insights allow for an in depth analysis of the Naga conundrum. Despite all the intensive battles and human rights atrocities of the Indian army, the trusted underground movement of past, the trauma of factional battles within, the authentic donations and the illegal extortions and the accumulation of dirty and corrupt politics; the characters of Mose, Neituo, Neilhounuo, Roko, Nime and Setuo have not lost connect with the essence of the conflict between the Indian state and Nagaland. The natural attitude would be to be misguided by the distorted truths of their conditions and circumstances which is to see the Naga self as undignified and without integrity. All of the army atrocities, factional infighting, donations, extortions and corruptions perceived through Husserl's concept of "epoché" (Zahavi 45) takes it out of the equation, so that the essence of the conflict gains an ever-present salience.

> Every intellectual process and indeed every mental process whatever, while being enacted, can be made the object of a pure "seeing" and understanding, and is something absolutely given in this "seeing". (Husserl *The Idea* 24)

Easterine Kire through her people stories provides a dignified presentation of the original cause which in other words means to see the conflict through a phenomenological attitude. In *Bitter Wormwood*, Neibou recollects that his grandfather Mose had once said, "…we fight wars in order to protect ourselves, not to force our will on others. The man who takes the gun, must be sure he does it for the rights reasons. That reason, he said should be love, not hate" (237). In this case the love of one's particular way of life, the Naga way of life that is threatened and the need to fight for the survival of that indigeneity and rootedness. Roko's character in *Life on Hold* once he realizes that the original cause is getting distorted he cannot find himself to continue to partake in the robbing of innocent and revenge killings of fellow Nagas. The absolute certainty that the original cause is no longer holding its sway over the national workers makes him absolutely certain that he can no longer hold himself back from what he considers the most honorable thing he could do. "I have been wrong, Setuo, I've been very wrong. The cause is dead" (103). He reveals to Setuo that he and

a couple of others are planning to take out the higher-ups in their group those who are detached from the Naga struggle and are completely corrupt. Though he knows that it will not stop the vicious circle of violence, he believes it is the least he can do. Roko seems to be conscious of the fact that he and his friends are not going to make it alive but he is willing to embrace death in all its dignity. Here there is a need to draw one's attention to Benedict Anderson's idea of a nation, one that is connected to the Naga idea of self, in other words the Naga identity, as a people who are willing to "… not so much kill, as willing to die for…" (7). Roko's willingness to die for the original cause is an important indication towards the honor and dignity assigned to the protection of the Naga way of life. Udayon Misra's scholarly engagements with the North-east provides an insight into the poetics of difference embedded in the Naga postcolonial consciousness vis-à-vis the Indian postcolonial consciousness. The Indian postcolonial consciousness that is firmly grounded on India's freedom struggle from the colonial British thereby generating a modular form of Indian nationalism. However, the Naga's notions of homeland is rooted deeply in the indigenous and historical roots of the Naga people. But it must be highlighted here that those "…who wished to carry over the nationalism of the Independence period and that of the post-independence period had to be substantially different" (Misra, *India's North-east* 85). Here an "eidectic reduction" (Zahavi 44) takes place through the experiences of the characters like Mose, Neituo, Roko and Nime, that is, the subjective experience may direct one to a number of essential structures that enable a given object to arrive at those attributes that cannot be set aside as being nonessential to that given object or situation. It ultimately establishes the most critical and essential nature of the object in question, in other words, the very essence of what is given to us in that experience. For the Nagas, the essence of the Naga struggle is all about protecting their homeland and thereby protecting the Naga way of life.

Malsawmi Jacob in "In Conversation with Malsawmi Jacob" published in *Writers in Conversation* (2017), reveals that her novel *Zorami* "deals with historical events, and many of the characters in the novel are based on real people" (Sarangi 4). There are references to Laldenga who was the president of the Mizo National Front (MNF), Nikhuma who wrote the award winning novel *Chhumpui Zing karah* (In the Midst of Thick Clouds), Lieutenant Colonel Lalliana who was known for his intelligence and courage among others. The novel as such depicts through fiction the

lives of people who have undergone some of the most intense experiences of their lifetime. She further reveals the details of a trip to Aizawl, Mizoram where she attended to the death of a friend's husband in the year 2004. During the condolence period in the Mizo tradition, where near and dear ones continually provide company to the grieving family post the funeral lasting for days or weeks, she had struck up conversations on Mizoram's twenty-year struggle for independence with fellow condolers. The conversations that she initiated led to a process of a more intensive research initiative of collecting relevant data to feed the idea of a novel. People narrated their personal experiences and also provided their own perspective on some of the key events that influenced the struggle for Mizo independence. The interviewees included, among others, victims of the struggle, notable Mizo MNF leaders and one of the pastors who was involved in the negotiation of the peace process. As such, Jacob unveils that the novel that she had undertaken was reminiscent of the requirements that Easterine Kire establishes for a "historical fiction" (Kire, "FAQ"). Certainly, the key similarities between Kire's and Jacob's novels are the fact that the focus is on experiences of people and not just people but "real people" (Sarangi 4) or as Kire puts it "real people and their lives" (Daftuar "For Easterine").

In Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* the immediate cause for the MNF fight for independence is the ill-fated *mautam* which led to the famine in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Mizo Union government of the erstwhile district of Lushai Hills, now the state of Mizoram, had made repeated appeals to the Indian government and more specifically to the Assamese Chief Minister B.P. Chaliha. However, it continued to fall on deaf ears and no relief measures were provided to the famine-stricken Mizo populace. There were deaths being reported from various quarters of Mizo district specially the rural parts of the region.

> The government is not helping us either. The leaders of Assam know all about the *mautam* and famine but they don't care. We are only a district of Assam and what do they care about tribal people like us? They say some people have already died in some far off villages. (33)

This lack of response is interpreted to be a deliberate act of negligence towards the famine starved and stricken Mizo population evoking a sense of being discriminated against. Instead of the expected relief measures the Mizos are further burdened by a new legislation of the Assam government which was to make Assamese

the compulsory medium of instruction even in the schools under jurisdiction of the Mizo district. While protests broke out on the streets of Aizawl against the Assamese language imposition, in which Zorami the protagonist takes part in as a young student, the MNF movement had already gained massive momentum. The speech of Pu Laldenga began to impact and inspire the heart, mind and soul of the general public in villages like Dampui. Pu Laldenga's speech focuses on the difference between the Mizos and Indians. "Our culture is different. Our customs and practices are different. Our religion is different. So they do not consider us as their people" (61). His speech continues to build up to a grand crescendo amidst young men shouting "Freedom! Freedom!" (61). He continues, "…if we do not liberate our land now, won't our descendants rise up in anger against us? Won't they dig out our dry bones, hang them up and heap them with curses" (61-62). The village of Dampui soon after the emotionally inspired speech is over began to enroll the young men and women as MNF volunteers. Among them are Ralkapa and Laldinpuii. Ralkapa's father opposes his son's decision to join the MNF movement asking him instead to continue his studies if he intends to serve the interest of the Mizo people. "There's no time for that. We need freedom now!" (64) is Ralkapa's response to his father's advice. Laldinpuii is a brilliant student who stood at the top of her class. She nurtures the desire to become a medical doctor but her heart is set on fire by the speech. Her convictions on the need for freedom from external control and the aspiration of building a Mizo nation stirs her imagination. Another character of significance is Nikhuma who is the block president of the MNF at a small village and is a dedicated patriot for the cause of Mizo independence. When he is called upon by the leaders of the MNF to head out to Aizawl immediately he does so but with a slight hint of concern for his family. To answer the call for the cause of the Mizo nation he knows he must make grave sacrifices one that demands a complete detachment even from his loved ones. Nikhuma's wife Mani despite not quite agreeing with his decision to completely commit himself to the Mizo national cause she "…reconciled herself to the inevitable…but since her protests did not succeed in changing his mind, she had given up… " (74).

> All set to go, he gazed for a long time at his sleeping children. Finally, he gave his wife a half smile and patted her on the shoulder for a farewell. Dawn had not yet broken when he stepped out. (75)

When Nikhuma arrives at the MNF headquarters at Aizawl he is brought up to date on all the proceedings. Pu Laldenga informs the gathering about how all block presidents like Nikhuma are now on the way to become parliament members which will be formalized after each member's signature on the Declaration of Independence. The language of the Declaration of Independence included a list of grievances against the Indian state and the main grievance is one that was famine related.

> The Government of India refused to supply us food and arrange other assistance during the famine. Not only that, it also prohibited us from seeking and receiving assistance from friendly countries. This resulted in the death of many people. (77)

Nikhuma and all other members put forth their signatures on the Declaration which stated that from the 1st of March 1966, Mizoram will be an independent nation free from all external control. "Nikhuma's heart pounded as he put his signature under the Declaration" (77). The month of March 1966, which was around two months from the time the Declaration had been signed, arrives with great excitement in the hearts of the parliamentarians. The capture of the treasury at Aizawl and the shootouts between Assam rifles and the MNF volunteers unfolds as duly planned. While the MNF volunteers continued to make considerable gains at Aizawl the first major response from the Indian state originates from the skies.

> Suddenly, a roaring sound came from above. The men looked up in the midst of their shooting and saw two aeroplanes in the sky. They put down their guns and watched in horrified fascination as some objects dropped from the planes and fell with loud bursts. (88)

Soon after the bombing, an elderly man attempts to comfort the anxious civilians who are visibly worried about their future and are gathered at a safe location at the outskirt of Aizawl. "The army men will not harm innocent people. They are supposed to protect the citizens" (92). One among the many civilians reacts by saying that the Indian army made no such distinctions in the recent bombings.

> But they dropped the bombs on the town. They do not consider whether people are innocent or not. Even young children and babies are not spared. An uncomfortable silence. (92)

As reinforcements of the Indian army constantly arrive they begin to overrun towns and villages. There are many different accounts of atrocities that are committed

by the Indian army, human rights violations and some others of brutal killings of even civilians. The reports of their ruthlessness and brutality are passed on by word of mouth. On route to Aizawl from Silchar, in the Mizo villages in between, they are reported to have shot down the civilians who were just watching the military convoys passing through.

> The military approach adopted by India to suppress the armed insurgency and democratic dissents in the region have yielded widespread massive human rights violations. (Thounoujam 67)

At Darman village they reacted heavily against the villagers when the patrolling party of the army is shot at from the jungle nearby. The Indian army failed to get hold of the attackers so they vented their anger on the helpless villagers. It was reported that nine villagers had been arrested at random and one of them was a lady school teacher. "She was never seen again after her arrest" (103). At another village Biltlang, a small village of just about fifty houses, a group of Indian army men turn up and cause quite a ruckus. The villagers at Biltlang are fairly isolated and have not been entrenched in the MNF movement. Not a single MNF member is found in the village however "…the Major and his soldiers were in a mood for action…They tortured six men to death and the burned the houses" (104). Another village that the Major and his men approached is of the village of Bakla. In this village, a young pastor who is hopeful of speaking the language of peace with the army men attempts to convince the Major not to harm any civilians. However, the Major is unconvinced and he threatens the pastor asking him to collect his belongings as they are going to burn his house down. "The pastor went in. The Major shot him from the back and he fell down. While he was writhing on the floor, the men set the house on fire with him inside" (106).

Malsawmi Jacob's book of poetry *Four Gardens and Other Poems* too highlights some of the violence, bloodshed, loss and angst of the troubled times in question – the Mizo struggle for independence. In her poem "Drowned" she alludes to way in which homes have been destroyed. It allows the reader to connect to MNF movement which resulted in the Indian army's operations in the region leading to extreme violence, enormous atrocities and human rights violations. The reference to the violence and bloodshed in Jacob's poetry is more direct and blatantly revealed – leaving very little for the reader's imagination to engage with.

Our homes are drowned
in flood of blood
and tears
They come from jungles
loot shoot
commit carnage
Then come bigger guns
from cities
more carnage
more cries (lines 1-10)

Another poetic work that highlights the pain and trauma associated with the times in question is very well presented in “These Hills”. The hills and plains dichotomy has always been depicted as one between the tribals and the general population respectively. She speaks about how “Up here on these hills/time moves at a snail’s pace/on winding roads” (lines 1-3) but then “shots that shatter/silence now and then/staining green hills/red” (lines 10-13). The images evoke two very opposing sets of emotions one where there is sense of calm and comfort which all of a sudden is violently altered to a sense of panic and horror by the sounds of guns bloodying the hills. “The Songster’s Lament” begins with a scene where the images of the broken guitar strings are alluded to and the song goes out of tune, “guitar strings all broken/the song becomes a tuneless chant:” (lines 2-3)

When guns sounded in our land
bombs shouted
fire screamed
cicadas stopped singing
homes went up in flame
hearths were razed
the sacred profaned
music fell silent. (lines 4-11)

It is very apt for Jacob to relate the painful ordeals of the MNF movement with the Mizos love for music and songs. The conditions and circumstances that brought about countless deaths is compared to the inability of the songster to strum his guitar and produce a song. In effect, the death of music and songs is the death of the soulful

and musical Mizo. Jacob's poetry provides us with a poetic take on the atrocities and human rights violations that took place during the times in question. It provides the reader with brief and episodic images of the kind that intersperses well with the prose of her novel *Zorami*.

While there are the likes of Nikhuma and Laldinpuii who had stood steadfast right to the very end of the disturbance period or their lives aligned to the original cause of fighting for the Mizo independence, there is Ralkapa who despite his enthusiasm, on being threatened by death, becomes an informer. "Go back to your people. But you will have to inform us about MNF movements and show us the MNF supporters" (98). Ralkapa and his type were forced to inform on more and more people and in order to save his skin "he resorted to accusing innocent ones also" (99). This brought about a new turn of events in the MNF's struggle for independence where betrayals by Mizos on Mizos began to unfold frequently. The MNF war of independence which primarily focused on its battle against the Indian army now had to deal with the enemy from within. Commandants of the MNF began to carefully analyze the way in which their whereabouts are being discovered by the Indian army, knowing very well that such counter operations by the military were only possible if there are spies within. Measures to identify anti-MNF activities are initiated to find spies within to have them executed. In fact many such acts of Indian army informers being caught by the MNF were shot to death on the spot, among them, many who were innocent. There was a daily newspaper whose editor was labelled as working against the interest of the Mizo cause, "…we have to silence that paper" (126). Pu Lalrinmawia, the editor, asked some relevant questions about the state of affairs through his journalism. He wrote news items related to the MNF who were butchering innocent civilians, "…they are slaughtering their fellow Mizo men. What is the point, we ask, what is the point?" (128). The editor was seen by witnesses to have been guided out of his home by around four men at gunpoint, since he did not return home, his family was naturally worried, "Later in the night, the local search party found his body by the roadside" (129).

The accounts of Lalawmpuia are ones that are definitive of one who is closely associated with the original cause. He was a proclaimed nationalist from a very young age and was worried about the state of affairs in Mizoram because of external influences impacting the Mizo's hitherto largely undisrupted life. Because of these

convictions he is ready to fight against the Indians and he joined up as an MNF volunteer. But never did it occur to him that he would be pitted against his own people. There was one suspected to be a spy within their division an informer to the Indian army. Though he is interrogated repeatedly the suspect denied being involved, the commander to be on the safe side decides that he must be 'put away' rather than risk the lives of his men. Lalawmpuia is assigned the task of shooting the alleged spy as a part of the execution order for acts of betrayal within the ranks. But he could not come to terms with the act of killing a fellow Mizo even if he is guilty. "We dreamt of a free Mizoram where people will live in peace. But we're falling into worse bondage! More and more bloodshed. Mizos killing Mizos" (133). He escapes from the MNF camp and is designated as a deserter because he refused to execute a fellow Mizo informer. However, his plans of resuming a normal life at home was shattered when Ralkapa informed the Indian army about his return. The Indian army acted promptly and brought him into custody and interrogations accompanied by severe forms of torture. "The interpreter was called, the questioning began. Lalawmpuia readily admitted he was an MNF deserter" (134). The Indian army commandant came in after the junior officers failed to extract any useful information out of him. He promises to set him free to continue to live his life as he willed only if he revealed, "Only one small thing. Just tell me the name of the group commander, the one who harassed you and the location of the camp" (135). The reply from Lalawmpuia was, "I cannot do that" (135). The commandant drew out a gun and fixed it to the deserter's forehead and said "I can shoot you right here" (135). But Lalawmpuia, deserter he might be to the cause of not killing another Mizo, but informer he will never be as the commandant's threats fails to break his resolve. "The commandant glared. He could not understand how this puny, insignificant person had the guts to face him this way" (135).

The character of Lalawmpuia in *Zorami* and that of Mose in *Bitter Wormwood* and Roko in *Life on Hold* unveils the similarities in the conditions and circumstances of the Naga and Mizo armed struggles for independence. These characters have all shown that they are passionate about the original cause and that the circumstances and conditions that have brought about equations where Mizo killing Mizos or Nagas killing Nagas shakes their very soul. In the case of Mose, it is about reflecting back on his own days of having fought the Naga war of independence and comparing it to the new generation of factional extortions and killings where the original cause is no

longer visible. He laments the fact that circumstances and conditions have come about to such a state of affairs. Mose in *Bitter Wormwood* in a sad voice says, "…sometimes, I wonder if those young new soldiers in the factional groups even know what they are fight for" (161). Roko in *Life on Hold* belongs to the very age of "new soldiers in the factional groups" that Mose refers to. However, Roko was different he was full of conviction and hopes for the success of the original cause unlike the many factional members who surrounded him. In fact it was clear from his last moments of interaction with Setuo where he reveals that the "cause is dead" (103) and he is absolutely distraught by the fact that his comrades have become corrupt and wayward. Only Roko seems to be severely disturbed by the circumstances where factional killings for exchange of money over the lives of fellow Nagas has become the trend of the day. "Such a waste…such a waste. For a moment Setuo thought he was about to cry" (103). Roko decides to take the lives of his faction members who are propagating the killing of fellow Nagas and completely diluting the original cause. He commits himself to this act only because he knows that if he quits the faction he will be hunted down and assassinated. On the other hand, Lalawmpuia in *Zorami* refuses and withdraws from the act of executing a fellow Mizo informer because he believes that it deviates from the original cause and he is willing to risk going back to a life of potential normalcy rather than kill a fellow Mizo. However, he is severely tested after being tracked, caught, interrogated and tortured but he refuses to turn an informer on fellow Mizos no matter what. The original cause, essence or the "self-givenness" (Husserl *The Idea* 28) of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei struggle for autonomy and freedom is based on the need to protect and preserve one's respective way of life – the fear of assimilation and loss of one's identity.

Husserl's concept of "epoché" (Zahavi 45) creates the possibility of suspending or bracketing the natural attitude which makes one see things that one had taken for granted. The immediate cause for the Mizo struggle for independence is very often and frequently assigned to the *mautam* famine and the negligence on part of the Indian state to provide necessary relief measures. The natural attitude makes one observe and interpret events in line with our preconceived notions, as such it becomes necessary for one, "…to refuse our complicity…" (Merleau-Ponty 64) with the obvious way of seeing things leading to a temperament of "presuppositionlessness" (Zahavi 44). In other words, to not let the stereotypes and presuppositions inform one's

perception of the world and allow that to act as an impediment to the realization of the reality and truth of one's lived-experiences. The Mizo struggle for independence is based on a poetics of difference and as such is aligned to the original cause of protecting and preserving the Mizo way of life. More often than not the natural attitude would make events like *mautam* famine, the launch of the Mizo independence struggle, the subsequent air raids and war atrocities, human rights violation and internal differences where Mizos kill Mizos as the primary focus of the conflict. As Husserl highlights for the need to go back to the "things themselves" (Zahavi 17) in order to understand the true nature of the problem as there is a need to remove all the superfluous knowledge that feeds into the construction of stereotypes and presuppositions. Zahavi further discusses Husserl's notion of eidectic reduction which "…allows us to distinguish between the accidental properties of the object, that is, the invariant structures that make the object into the type of object it is…" (Zahavi 39). Just as Mose and Roko remained faithful to the original cause not allowing the military operations, factional wars and killings, and other forms of rivalry leading to Nagas killing Nagas to deter them from coming to terms with the essence of their existence, Lalawmpuia too remains faithful unwilling to give up the hope deeply associated with the need to protect and preserve the Mizo way of life. The essence in question is informed by an in depth commitment and love for keeping alive the Mizo way of life, particularities that define Mizo indigeneity and identity – a sense of rootedness.

The poet Robin S. Ngangom in his article alludes to the nature of poetry that evolves out of Manipur and how it is dependent on the lived experiences of the people of the region. It is more often than not a result of the violence and bloodshed that has resulted over decades of armed struggles and conflicts. Ngangom in his article "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry – An Overview" writes that "… living with the menace of the gun does not permit the Manipuri poet to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that the poet must perforce master 'the art of witness'" (299). Ngangom's reference to the "art of witness" presents a very significant and critical aspect as to how the literary arts are associated with the experience of observation, to observe and act as a witness to what is happening around the self-embedded in Manipur. The reference to mastering the art of witness suggests the possibility of there being a certain technique to it and perhaps key to it is the question of survival. The absence of rule of law and the institution of a state of

exception all strongly indicate the abruptness with which the question of living and dying may unfold before one's eyes – one as easily as the other. And the poet must, to present the realities embedded within the unpredictable lived-experiences of the people, master the art of presenting what he or she witnesses.

Amarjeet M. Singh and R.K. Sanaiyama in their article "Politics of Counter-insurgency and the Expansion of Security Bureaucracy" state that the conditions in states like Manipur of the North-east are projected by the following conditions.

> Living in such a situation, the people have suffered hardships and sufferings. The state's capacity to deliver goods and services and guarantee rule of law and security have not been progressive all these years. On the contrary, the state's response has been largely limited to the use of force, call for peace talks (reconciliation) and providing more development funds, even when one knows that development indicators such as health, poverty and employment are not showing signs of improvement in the region. (150)

Robin S. Ngangom's poems from the collection of poetry *Words and the Silence* provide a picture of the grim realities of the state of Manipur. The poem "The Dead shall Mourn the Living" presents the feelings of despair, pain, and loss that have resulted from the conflicts which have been a part of decades of Manipur's history – the armed struggles for liberation of Manipur and armed conflicts within the different groups fighting for the cause of Manipuri autonomy. "How many times have we seen/love dying in crystal eyes and/the slow cataract of hate forming?" (lines 7-9). These lines unveil the resentment and hatred buried in the unending conflicts that influence the lives of the people of Manipur. The creative element embedded in the composition of his poetry not only best articulates the intricacy and complexities of the Manipuri imbroglio but also leaves an openendedness to the interpretation of his lines. And he talks about a "culture of inhumanity" (line 4) that has evolved out these conflicts in the poem titled "To My People". Moreover, in the poem "Curfew" there is reference to civilian loss of lives, "People were killed in a lawless firing/and the streets today observe/hour long silence for the departed" (lines 13-15). The poem "Afternoon Rain" speaks of the gradual dissipation of certain traditions and practices that have altered with the passage of time. A certain nostalgia linked to the loss of one's culture and identity. "Among these slopes where rustic songs/have disappeared with

time/Again the mist takes us by surprise/Again the hills echo with wonder" (lines 21-24). In the collection of poems from *Time's Crossroads* the poet in "Winter Words" refers to how there is a sense of bleakness that has developed over a period time in the land of his ancestors. All that is taking place around the people of the land places them in the "thick of death" (line 5) and that the poet works terribly hard to keep "death at bay" (line 17). He concludes the poem citing that it is impossible to "celebrate life/ in the midst of death" (lines 29-30) and that is really what is happening all around in his homeland – people are held back from living because death is always knocking around the corner. In the poem "Suicide" Ngangom alludes to the death which has been reported and recorded as a suicide. However, he raises critical doubt about the calling out of the death as a suicide with certainty. "Some say suicide, but then/the dead man is not the one/ to enact it" (lines 19-21). If it is not a suicide then it must be a murder, in fact the poem unfolds in a way that, "Someone/suggests murder and truth/becomes stranger than fiction" (lines 22-24). What the poet brings to the reader's attention is the reality about how complex and confusing the state of affairs has become in the state of Manipur. And he seems to suggest that the only one who would know what happened is the lifeless man himself. "But the dead man took/his understanding with him" (lines 33-34). *The Desire of Roots* has a number of poems that speak about the stark reality associated with the conditions in Manipur. In the poem "The Dead" the poet Ngangom refers to the condition where there is an absence of love and compares it to a condition that is similar to one being dead.

> We must be dead.
> Returning home at night
> where love does not wait for us,
> wolfing and breathing is not life.
> . . . .
> Day after day we witness
> scenes from the living, and
> day by day we go on dying. (lines 1-4, 31-33)

In another poem titled "I am Unable to Explain" the poet is incapable of making sense of the world around him in Manipur. What does not make sense to him as an adult he knows it will make even lesser sense to his daughter. Because when the poet attempts to explain that what often seems to be a source of joy very often has

disguised pain waiting just around the corner – words fall short. The poet highlights the delicacy with which life and death attempt to find their balance amidst a society that is entrenched in violence and death.

> 'I am thankful to God for keeping me safe,' someone said
> but he doesn't know that his mother has died.
> And behind all this a brighter future
> is just waiting to be dropped. (lines 24-27)

Robin S. Ngangom's poetry provides a keen perspective on the predicaments of life and death that are embedded in the lives of the Meitei people of Manipur. The three books of poetry selected for this research initiative span across the eighties, the nineties and the early part of the new millennium and what is undeniable is the delicate and transient nature of life. The conflicts between the Indian state and the home grown struggles for a free Manipur, devoid of external control, is entrenched in inexplicable violence and bloodshed as the poems above depict. Brinda Thounoujam in her article "Phenomenon of Impunity – Terror Regime, Human Rights and Political Injustice in Manipur" (2018) explains how for many years after the kingdom of Manipur first came under colonial rule and then was made a state of India under duress and its consequent impact on the lives of the people of the region. Ngangom highlights this point of rather abruptly and unexpectedly becoming a part of the Indian state in his poem, "To a Valley Known as Imphal" from *Words and the Silence* "at cockcrow one morning we found/ourselves belonging to a nation" (lines 26-27). What is apparent from the lines is that it was an event which occurred against the aspirations of the people of Manipur. And as such, the poet Ngangom makes reference to how the land and people of Manipur are frequently traded off for personal and selfish gains. In effect, highlighting what he often suggests is the betrayal of the original cause and the need to protect and preserve the Meitei way of life. In the collection of poems from *Words and the Silence* there are several poems that operate along this theme. One of the poems is "Racial Progression" where the poet commences by saying "We are the remnants of a dying people/we scorn the memory of the dead" (lines 1-2). The poet continues to the present the fickle mindedness by which Manipuris are pitted against other Manipuris, Meiteis killing Meiteis.

> Here is everything is bought and sold
> to the highest bidder.

> The gunpoint, the hypodermic needle, and currency
> notes: these are the only language we know.
> Brothers buy brothers and fathers sell sons
> as a way of life. (lines 8-13)

In another poem "Now Words Should Catch Fire…" Ngangom is agonized by the fact that there are bloody trade-offs causing people to lose touch with a certain sanctity that is associated with the past. "Weary of the culture of inhumanity/tired of a tradition of shamelessness/will we join blood-moneyed hands?/Will we wear a crown of rupees/and blind our souls?" (lines 7-11). In another poem, "I am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains" highlights the condition of one's own being disowned. The incapacity of one to protect and preserve the indigenous Meitei way of life as one is compelled to witness the brutal killings of innocent civilian lives, "Close your eyes to the rapacious greed of your fathers/your ears to the moans of your own dying" (bk. 1, lines 8-9). He goes on to sarcastically say, "Let us wage war on innocent things/on nature's children, on sons of the soil/with knives, sticks and stones" (lines 16-18). In the collection of poems from *Time's Crossroads* the same theme of betrayal to the original cause of protecting the Manipuri way of life is highlighted again. In the poem "Guidebook" Ngangom appears to be alluding to how the people of Manipur are struggling to forcefully align themselves to the idea of being an Indian disconnected from their roots. "Here natives as grasping as the citizens/of independent India" (lines 10-11) and continues by saying "we live as a Babel of colourful tribes/selling indigenous culture" (lines 14-15). Ngangom closes the poem by subtly highlighting to the "burrower/from the tough plains" (lines 19-20) that "he should remember/that we who seem uncouth/will also bite the hand which feeds" (lines 22-24). He then goes on to suggest in "From the Book of Grievances" that they as Meteis have become responsible for bringing about their own miserable conditions where Meiteis are extorting from other Meiteis even to the point of killing fellow Meiteis. "We become our own perpetrator/victims of our own dark deeds" (bk.2, lines 56-57). A couple of poems from the *The Desire of Roots* also reveal the hardships and difficulties of the Manipuri people brought about by factionalisms and extortions. In the poem "Writer" he presents to the reader the predicaments of the day-to-day civilian population who are harassed by those who claim to fight for the freedom of Manipur. The compulsion to "shut down" (line 17) one's clinical practice because of those who come around

for “free check-up” (line 19) presents one to the “reality” (line 28) of the everyday experience of the people.

> The ophthalmic optician
> shut down his clinic
> after far-sighted revolutionaries
> came for a free check-up. (lines 16-19)

In another poem titled “Revolutionaries” Ngangom takes a dig at how just about anyone could claim the title of becoming a nationalist who was committed to fighting for liberation of Manipur. Even those who spent their time just lying about and making merry claimed the honorable title of a revolutionary. “When the owner of the house who was/woken up by the dogs asked ‘Who goes there?’ the/wastrel found his wits and replied, ‘In the service of the/motherland’ in a solemn voice as one would expect a/revolutionary to reply” (57). Here is another clear example people making claims of fighting for the motherland and such casual declarations of patriotism consequently belittles the idea of fighting for an authentic cause – trivializing the struggle to protect and preserve the Meitei identity.

The suspension and bracketing of all the extraneous knowledge is absolutely fundamental in enabling a clear and focused understanding of the stereotypical constructs about the conflict and violence in Manipur. Husserl’s concepts around “epoché” (Zahavi 45) presents this critical need of setting aside the impact and influence of all presupposed existing forms of knowledge to arrive at the essence of the conflict in Manipur vis-à-vis the Indian state – a condition of “presuppositionlessness” (Zahavi 44). The need to, as Husserl puts it, to go back to the “things themselves” (Zahavi 17) and allow for a keenness to look at the conflict and its accompanying challenges from a fresh perspective – “new eyes” (Schmitt 239). Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that a focus on essentialism provides for a perspective that is very different when analyzed in relation to the indigenous peoples, in this case like those of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis of North-east India.

> The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of a people, makes for a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by indigenous peoples. (84)

Thounoujam asks a very pertinent question "Is there a possibility of a better society without 'forced nationalism'?" (64). Where did it all begin? Was this a result of the Indian state not being able to engage with a Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur that was essentially different from the rest of India where the postcolonial nationalism of the center was just imprinted upon the region? Thounoujam further raises the queries around how every form of resistance had been interpreted to be one that is against the Indian state; as though driven by aspirations of a separatist mind as such justifying the application of military might to all the differences found embedded in the region.

> In the name of national security, fighting insurgency and maintenance of law and order, the state is systematically empowered by its legislations to repress any dissent violently, using military, paramilitary, state police and civil administration. (67)

Husserl stresses on this need to bare all the unessential attributes that leads the minds astray and away from the vantage point of being able to see the essentialisms that provide clarity towards an understanding of the phenomenon in question. Zahavi discusses Husserl's concept of "phenomenological reduction" (Zahavi 57) where in the ultimate objective is to arrive at the essence of the perceived object or phenomenon, which "…allows us to distinguish between the accidental properties of the object, that is, the invariant structures that make the object into the type of object it is…" (Zahavi 39). In the poem "Evening" from *Words and the Silence* Ngangom addresses a possible and potential future that may have been. What that future is remains unarticulated "Of what might have been/we shall never speak" (lines 13-14) But then in his "Poem Against the End" from *The Desire of Roots* Ngangom engages one's imagination quite differently by exploring the need to voice the unspeakable. "Until it's time to speak/the unspeakable/even with accents of defeat" (lines 19-21). Satya P. Mohanty directs our attention to the "…need to reconstruct what our relevant community might have been, appreciate the social and historical dimensions of our innermost selves" (47). This connect to the very "innermost selves" in a way can be interpreted to be the coming to terms with Husserl's essence of what led to the conflict in the first place. The focus on the need to go back to the things themselves to protect and preserve the Meitei, Naga or Mizo indigenous ways of life based on the argument that there is a poetics of difference that is at play here. J. Maggio draws one's attention

to the exigency to transcend mere representation as suggested through Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by acknowledging that there are "disparate cultures" (Maggio 420) that generate the need for alternative accounts and views to be heard. Beyond representation of the subalterns, which is also beyond the act of speaking on their behalf, there is a need for the dominant community to exercise the ethics of listening to what is being articulated. The need to be able to appreciate and acknowledge this poetics of difference that is a part of the social and cultural reality of the people of the North-east. This sense of rootedness in the indigenous ways of the people of the North-east finds precise expression in the works of Ngangom. In his poem "From the Book of Grievances" from *Time's Crossroads* he speaks with a great sense of pride and fondness when he writes, "In these native lands/under the bamboos and guardian hills/seated on carpets of clouds/We could see the glint of paddy-fields/gripped by rain and mist/" (bk. 2, lines 16-20). Smith alludes to the need for "…reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground" (79). In the process of enforcing a modular form of Indian nationalism in Manipur and in extension in the states of Nagaland and Mizoram, the violent use of the Indian state's military capacity is often questioned. Venkat D. Rao finds it difficult to voice the plight of the people who have been rendered victims to the Indian state's military operations in the region, when he asks, "By what right can I invoke an identity to communicate with this deeply wronged heterotopia called the Northeast?" (47).

However, the invocation of the essentialist regional identity of the North-east based on people's experiences becomes somewhat problematic as the nation-building efforts of the Indian state has its own due obligations. In fact the nation-building efforts in question depict a strict adherence to the essentialist stance of the mainstream Indian identity as such the impasse – the deadlock. The Indian state as such labels the essentialist focus of the respective experiences of being Naga, Mizo or Meitei as promoting "identity politics" (Bernstein 52). It is projected as an identity of politics that focuses on narrow, parochial and selfish interests that could potentially disconnect one's identity from that of the pan-Indian identity. In effect, the heavy emphasis on differences of the particular ways of life associated with the Nagas, Mizos or Meiteis presenting a distinctiveness from the mainstream Indian identity can potentially lead to schisms or balkanization of the Indian state. The articulation of the North-east

identity in what is often referred to as its essence may not always appreciated by the Indian mainstream. In fact the rootedness to one's indigeneity is often misinterpreted by the exterior mainstream Indian gaze to be deeply connected to the urge of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei looking to find ways to break away from the nation. However, the insider's perspective on the same would characterize the same urge to an in depth need to protect and preserve indigenous ways of life. Bijukumar highlights a very pertinent point that, "…the assertion of ethnic identity and the accompanying extremist tendencies are related to the feeling of losing one's own identity, marginalization and exploitation by others" (29). Parag M. Sarma highlights from a historical perspective – the stage of India's nascent phase of becoming an independent nation – when there was, "a kind of inclination towards metanarratives that was emerging in India in the first flush of Independence and the conscious attempt to consolidate a larger Indian identity by generating regional identities by processes of homogenizing" (39). Sanjib Baruah in his article "Gulliver's Troubles: State and Militants in North-east India" (2002) mentions aptly how the nature of this impasse unfolds in the dichotomy between the region and the Indian state's prerogatives.

> A central question that is increasingly at the root of the disconnect between the vision and agendas of the Indian state and what animates the persistent politics of militancy in the north-east – and the complicity of segments of mainstream politicians and civil society with it – is whether the control over land, resources, ideas and people would remain in the hands of the peoples of the region or would they pass on to the control of the institutions of the Indian state which privileges the pan-Indian point of view at the expense of the regional one. (4182)

Robin S. Ngangom through his insightful poetry presents this condition of the impasse between the North-east vis-à-vis the Indian state. In the poem "The Ignominy of Geometry" from *The Desire of Roots* the poet stresses on how "The ignominy of geometry/the inability to see beyond centres and triangles/" (lines 27-28) is reflective of the relationships that are absolutely fixed in nature between North-east vis-à-vis its center, the Indian state. The characteristics of the essentialism of the North-east is interpreted by the Indian state as one that is self-centred and one that is closely linked to identity politics. As such identity politics as a result must be avoided and the North-east communities like the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis should assimilate into the

mainstream Indian identity for their benefit and the benefit of the Indian nation. This view finds great echo in Rodriguez's, Chavez's and Steele's attempt to assimilate to the mainstream American culture with which they associate a number of benefits as highlighted in the chapter "Cultural Particularity vs. Universal Humanity" from the book *Learning from Experiences* by Paula M.L. Moya. One of the obvious benefits that is highlighted by Rodriguez who is of Hispanic origin is that one "…becomes skilled at negotiating the white man's way; we master his language and learn his social codes" (105). Linda Chàvez another individual who is Hispanic is referred to by Moya when she talks about how Chàvez feels that there is a need to "…deracinate minority children; only by becoming more 'American,' she will insist, can minorities 'move ahead' in our society" (104). Moya also engages a black American Shelby Steele's idea of considering that "…in our readiness to defend cultural particularity, we overlook the importance of seeing 'human universals'" (105). Steele's point of view that the greater we pay more attention to "our common humanity" the better the world becomes; "less conflictual, more harmonious, more egalitarian, more just" (Moya 105). To this end, Moya draws one's attention to Rodriguez's book *Hunger of Memory* (1983) and to his conceptual premise that one may "change one's identity" by "changing one's mind" (Moya 120). By changing the way one thinks and sees oneself one can alter one's identity is a rather postmodern concept of identity that focuses on the social constructedness and negotiability of one's identity. Rodriguez, Chavez and Steele work on finding ways to negotiate and deal with their skin color which acts as a blatant sign of difference that segregates them from the mainstream White American society. Moya refers to how Rodriguez denies that the color of his skin as having any significance in the construction of his identity, in fact, he goes on to say that his skin, in itself has no meaning. However, despite this mental dissociation from the attributes of his racial essence it becomes impossible for him to completely detach himself from other dark-skinned Hispanics. The mainstream White American community's gaze places him in the very same category as those whose racial origins are beyond the borders well into the depths of Mexico. Rodriguez's assertion through his book *Hunger for Memory* (1983) that he is no longer a member of the minority Hispanic community is rather ironical because his books are placed in the section for Hispanic authors, and indubitably talk show hosts and other journalists consider him a representative of the Hispanic community. A postmodernist understanding of identity

is characterized by negotiability and flexibility and that identity is socially constructed however the attempt to completely deny certain aspects of reality associated with one's identity, for instance the North-east region's Mongoloid phenotype, proves that racial dispositions cannot be entirely ignored. In attempting to adopt the conceptual framework and propositions that Moya highlights through Rodriguez, Chavez and Steele to the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri context there is a possibility that there are certain benefits however, it is also possible that one's understanding of universal humanity may be wrongly projected to be that of one particular manifestation of humanity being posited as universal. This particular manifestation of humanity, which is the mainstream Indian identity in this case, may exclude the racial attributes of the Mongoloid phenotype of the North-east from the idea of Indianness. So in effect, the changing of one's mind as in the case of Rodriguez does not guarantee a successful changing of one's identity as the collective identity defined racially will significantly contribute to the rejection of the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri as not being representative of an Indianness. Stuart Hall's inputs on the significance of differences in the constitution of one's identity cannot be overlooked, "…above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference" (17). Michael Rustin further alludes that the negativity associated with racial characteristics prove to be detrimental to the way a particular racial group may be perceived.

> [R]acial differences depend on the definition given to them by the other – that is to say, on the definition of the other – and the most powerful definitions of these kinds are those which are negative – definitions that we can call racist. (184)

So just as Rodriguez's, Chavez's and Steele's attempt to successfully assimilate into the mainstream American society by resolving to change one's mind and see oneself as deracinated from one's Hispanic or Black identity is problematic, a similar problem arises within attempts to assimilate into mainstream Indian society for the racially different Naga, Mizo or Meitei. Moya asserts that "This is because all identities, including racial ones, are inescapably relational: to know ourselves as *selves* requires us to know ourselves in relation to *others*" (110). What Rodriguez's, Chavez's and Steele's experiences of attempting to fully assimilate into the mainstream American society reveals is that there is a reality, that is independent of man's ability

to conceptually or linguistically construct that reality. It is useful to quote Moya here as she highlights that Rodriguez thus, "…ignores the dialectical, referential, and social nature of identity, and demonstrates his unwillingness to acknowledge the political, economic and epistemic consequences of his social location – of which race is one fundamental aspect" (120). Duncan McDuie-Ra refers to the way NDTV in 2014, in the wake of Nido a North-easterner's murder which took place in New Delhi, had staged an hour long talk show "Are Indians Racist?" He highlights that, "…the question itself is interesting, given Indians are treated as the potential racist collective, and the subjects of their potential racism, Northeast people, are cast outside this collective" (38). This aforementioned instance of casting the North-east outside the Indian identity brings into play critical questions around belonging and unbelonging. The North-east is racially coded as foreign and non-Indian and therefore treated as an outsider due to his physiognomy. As such a change of mind equals to a change of identity is bound to be flawed and ineffective due to factors that are associated with racial dispositions that depicts stark difference. Dominick LaCapra's stress on how identity politics should not be always thought of as being highly benevolent or as demonizing and the begetter of all political maladies of the contemporary modern world nor "…should it be conflated with identification in the sense of total fusion with others wherein difference is obliterated and criticism is tantamount to betrayal" (43).

Often, there is a tension between nation-building policies, on the one hand, and other identity groups, on the other, who claim that the policies of nation-building have homogenizing tendencies, and as such, are marginalizing or putting them at a disadvantage. This becomes more intensified when there is a strong identification of the majority national group with "a particular 'thick' culture or religion, and seeks to create unity by extending that cultural expression across the country" (Moore 99). When nationalists tendencies aggressively seek to build an identity that does not include the sentiments of the minority cultures, there is a fear of being overwhelmed by the majority culture that tends to homogenize through a process of assimilation. Apparently, such aggressive threats towards minority groups has the possibility of engendering the need for self-determination, self-governance and even secession to counter the possibility of one's identity from being rendered inconsequential. Shimray with reference to the North-east reveals that "…the fear of assimilation eventually emerges as a problem among the indigenous population in the region" (4641). Sanjoy

Hazarika aptly places the fear of the North-east communities in context as he uncovers the threat of external forces on their particular ways of life.

> Its people have a fear of being swamped by 'outsiders', of lifestyles and histories being destroyed by modern nation-states that bother little about small communities but pay more attention to 'strategic' considerations such as the natural resources of the area, their exploitation for the national 'good' and the region's proximity to a friendly or inimical neighbour. (160)

Moore explores this sensitive space where there is a need to accommodate dual concerns of measures that are non-oppressive towards minority groups and the need for a just and democratic political society. There is suggestion for imbibing what is referred to as a "need for a thin, political identity" (100). Where one's regional identity does not act as an impediment towards the expression of one's national identity. For instance, there is a need to accommodate and broaden concept of what constitutes being an Indian; just because one is a Bengali, a Punjabi, a Khasi or a Manipuri it should not mean that the characteristics associated with one's ethnic identity should be forfeited. As such one must be capable of being a Meitei and an Indian simultaneously or a Mizo and an Indian at the same time. To further emphasize the point, being a Naga or a Mizo should not be considered as opposing the essence of what defines an Indian.

> In cases where the state is dominated by a majority national group, and political autonomy for the minority national group is both possible (demographically) and desired by the group itself, fair treatment would seem to require political recognition of this aspiration to be collectively self-governing...one in which the thin political identity can encompass the different national communities on the territory. The goal here is to ensure that it is possible to be both aboriginal and Australian….(Moore 100)

The representative accounts of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom attempt to provide insight into the Naga, Mizo or Meitei ways of life respectively by focusing on "real people" (Sarangi 4) and "people stories" (Daftuar, "For Easterine") and the "art of witness" (Ngangom, "Contemporary Poetry" 299) to depict the realities of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei experience. The experiences

associated with the conflict and struggle of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei people is made discerningly accessible through their fiction and poetry. These literary articulations reflect a strong affiliation to a sense of place which foregrounds their lived-experiences based on a poetics of difference embedded in their social location vis-à-vis the mainstream of Indian society. The fictional representations attempt to provide alternative accounts which dig into the real-life experiences of people that have remained muted as distorted representations perpetuate stereotypes about the region. The writers in question depict a strong understanding and recognize that identity itself is a narrative socially constructed and is deeply ingrained within negative stereotypes presented about the region. As such there is an authentic need for representational efforts that reflect the reality of the lived-experiences of the people from marginalized spaces of the Nagas, Mizos and Meitei. There is a deep awareness and realization that their cultural identity is constructed through such narratives and losing those narratives will eventually lead to the loss of their cultural identity. As such, there is an authentic need to incorporate experiences of real people and their stories into the narrative accounts of the people and places of the region to protect and preserve their respective ways of life. But first, what is experience? The definition of experience here is restricted to the act of personally observing, encountering or undergoing a particular event or situation. This definition by and large focuses on experience as being subjective.

The postmodernist argument however rejects experience as a legitimate source of objective knowledge for identity. The very nature of experience being persuaded by a subjective notion of constructedness reveals that there is no guarantee that any one experience will lead a person to a set of common values or beliefs which can in turn be shared among people of a cultural identity group. Experience as such is rendered contradictory, fluid and unstable thus cannot be a source of objective knowledge. One can thus conclude that postmodernism also subscribes to the definition of objective knowledge or of truth that is no different from the essentialist or foundationalist paradigms. The essentialist theories of identity focus on identities being self-evident, unchanging and stable whereas the postmodernist theories of identity consider identities to be contradictory, flexible and unstable. As such postmodernists argue that identities are therefore constructed and not derived naturally from experience, and they dismiss experience as a basis for objective knowledge. Mohanty highlights that the

postmodernist's definition of objective knowledge is foundationalist "…for it remains within a specifically positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge" (36). The assumption of postmodernism is that the only kind of objective knowledge that is legitimate is one that is not dependent on theoretical presuppositions and comes to the conclusion that this theory dependence of experience is the affirmation that it will always be epistemically suspect. Mohanty then asks if there is any value in enquiring into the cognitive component of personal experiences with the possibility of extracting some objective knowledge from it. Paula M.L. Moya in her article "Postmodernism, "Realism" and the Politics of Identity" (2000) provides us with an answer to the value of the cognitive component in acquiring objective knowledge through personal experiences.

> Experiences are not wholly external events; they do not just happen. Experiences happen to us, and it is our theoretically mediated interpretation of an event that makes it an "experience." The meanings we give our experience are inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and "theories" through which we view the world. But the crucial claim in my argument is not that experience is theoretically mediated but rather that experience *in its mediated form* contains a "cognitive component" through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world. (81)

With the above definition brought foreword, Mohanty's postpositivist realist perspectives which provides legitimacy to experience as a source of objective knowledge is explored. A realist is, broadly speaking, one who believes in the existence of a reality that is, in part, causally independent of human's ability to construct it. In other words, it is important to recognize that "…while human's understanding of their world may provide access to 'reality,' their conceptual or linguistic constructions of the world do not constitute the totality of what can be considered real" (Moya, *Learning from* 27). She goes on to highlight that "…by seeing experience as causally related to the (social and natural) world, realists provide a way to evaluate the reliability of the knowledge humans have gained from their experiences" (Moya, *Learning from* 27-28). Michael R. Hames-García also speaks about how postpositivist realism involves the need to "… grasp the complexity of the social processes and multiple conditioning that make up the 'truth' of experience"

(109). As such, realism avoids essentialism's attempt to engage with knowledge that guarantees absolute certainty and rejects postmodernism's extreme skepticism towards the reliability of socially constructed knowledge.

There are a number of claims that postpositivist realist theory of identity makes, however, the primary focus will be on three specific claims which are relevant to the context of the present study. First is that the different social categories such as race, class gender etc. which make up an individual's "social location" (Moya, *Learning from* 39) are causally related to the experiences that an individual will have. Second, postpositivist realist theory of identity possesses a "cognitive component" (Moya, "Postmodernism, Realism" 81) to identity which allows for error and accuracy in interpreting one's experiences making provisions for the possibility of revising one's understanding of a given situation. Third, oppositional struggle is fundamental to one's ability to understand the world more accurately. The alternative constructions and accounts generated through the process of "oppositional struggle" (Moya, *Learning from* 44) provide new ways of looking at one's world that always complicate and often challenge dominant conceptions of what is "right," "true," and "beautiful" (Moya, *Learning from* 44).

The historical and social location of the North-east plays a salient role in determining the nature of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei experience in relation to the rest of India from a postpositivist realist point of view. One of the predominant questions that warrants due enquiry is what creates this deep need for protecting one's way of life for the indigenous people groups of the North-east. A struggle for independence that unfolds to the extent where one is "willing to die" (Anderson 7) for one's land as put forth by the notion of nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. Is it because there is a perceived threat to one's existence and identity which is grounded in the belief that, the borders of one's ancestral lands, if breached one will be overwhelmed by outsiders. The fears of what occurred in Tripura remains a major point of contention and source a deep-seated anxiety of people groups of the North-east. The indigenous populations becoming a minority in their own land overwhelmed by a Bengali population is the indigenous populations' experience in Tripura. This xenophobic fear appears to be grounded on the reality of a stark difference between North-easterners and the Indian mainstream. Chakraborty reifies the point of difference in that "…the people of Northeast India, especially the tribal people, differ from the plains people of India in

respect of culture, customary behaviour, faith and race" (6). This difference manifests into the way people who are of the White and Indian races are excluded from definitions of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei Mongoloid race and vice versa. However, the creation of both the colonial British India and independent postcolonial Indian state forcibly included their ancestral lands making them defiant because prior to the British occupation they had largely been hitherto "self-governing communities" (Scott 33) and undeniably "stateless" (Scott 31) in the modern sense of the term.

> The Northeast frontier was a colonial invention, since prior to the nineteenth century, it never existed as a frontier to any political state system, whether of South Asia, East Asia or Southeast Asia. In fact, it did not exist as a part of a political state system of any of the above three geopolitical zones prior to British occupation. (Baruah, "An Emerging" 28)

Furthermore, once occupied by the British one needs to recognize the fact that the British treated the frontier regions of the North-east, "…in terms of territory and population, their social organization…" (Baruah, "An Emerging" 28) in a markedly different manner from the rest of British India. As such there is no significant shared history between the North-east vis-à-vis mainstream India as it had remained remote and isolated from the rest of India, especially the hills, and as such the "… region does not find itself within the narrative and memory of the nation…" (Kikon 2833). Chakraborty also discusses the challenges of attempting to fit the region's histories into the nationalist narratives of Indian history (3). In the year 1871, during the colonial British period tea plantations were being expanded constantly towards the foothills of what is now present day Mizoram in the plains of Assam. This expansion into the ancestral hunting grounds of the Mizos was a matter of great concern for the village of Sailam who understood it to be a serious intrusion upon their homeland. Malsawmi Jacob provides an account of this historical event of Mizoram in her novel *Zorami* where the village chief speaks out with great vigour, "Who are these people that dare to build houses on our hunting grounds? They must be chased away" (153). The British were seen as an external threat to the integrity of their land and thereby the raid on the tea plantations, the killing of a British plantation manager and the subsequent kidnapping of his daughter, Mary Winchester. Even after the British pacified and occupied the land of the Mizos, this sense of the self-governing Mizo

who aspires to live a life devoid of external control was a significant part of the Mizo way of life and experience. The British respected the stark differences, between the Mizos and the rest of British India, which led to the categorization of the region as an excluded area from the rest of British India through Government of India Act 1935. Interestingly, Naga Hills was also placed under the excluded area by the erstwhile British by the same act. The difference of the Nagas of the North-east was not just recognized by the British, in fact, in the novel Neibou who is Mose's grandson in *Bitter Wormwood* is blatantly told upfront by his friend from a college in New Delhi, "But Neibou, you are not really Indian! I mean it is so clear to me that you are not" (208). This exclamatory remark by Rakesh to Neibou occurs when Neibou expresses his disgust in the way Nagas and other North-easterners are discriminated against by the Indian population at the national capital. Later in the novel when Rakesh on visiting Neibou's place in Nagaland, he admits to himself that, "…to be in Naga towns and villages seemed like being in another country altogether" (220). Going back to the initial days leading to India's independence the Nagas through A.Z. Phizo had taken initiatives for pushing the agenda of Nagaland's freedom. "What did Phizo write about? They say he wrote asking that Nagas should not be made a part of India" (53). The Nagas as such because of the reality of their experience of identifying themselves as different and distinct from mainstream India resort to the idea of a self-governing Nagaland. In the poem "Pastoral" from the *The Desire of Roots* Robin S. Ngangom alludes to the difference and distinctness of the Meiteis vis-á-vis the mainstream Indians.

> We see our true faces
> in the first mirror of dawn.
> The houses have all been buried inside stories,
> ossuaries of natives and masters,
> as the old herald a new history
> not knowing why they merely repeat themselves
> in the monoliths. (lines 3-9)

The poet refers to the Meitei self who wakes up everyday and is forced by reality to see one's true form and appearance first thing in the morning. A racial and cultural self who is different and distinct. The self that partakes in the repetitive act of engaging in the ways of the traditional past while attempting to adapt to a new history.

Perhaps alluding to Reid's "historical accident" (19) comment through which Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur were under duress made a part of British colonial India. It is within this historical and social location of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei self's identity that the stereotypes and presuppositions of insurgency and rebellion must be contextualized to gain insight into their respective "truth of experiences" (Hames-Garcia 109). A postpositivist realist perspective allows one to see the contextualized reality of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei who aspire for a "self-governing" (Scott 31) spirit towards one's respective homelands. For the Naga, Mizo and Meitei subjective experience of seeing oneself as an identity that is exclusive from the rest of India is not entirely unwarranted as it has its basis on the specificities embedded in their complex historical and social location. A place of our own logic and the appeal to the people as a repository of the authentic spirit of the nation is expressed through the experiences of the people groups such as the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis. As such, the derived meanings are informed and mediated by the epistemic traditions and subjective experiences of their social location, which in turn provides an insight into why the urge to protect and preserve their particular way of life, is seen to be indispensable. In *The Desire of Roots* the writer in the poem "Writer" hungers for the ability to freely express oneself. "As of now freedom of expression/would mean for him/expression of freedom" (lines 9-11). It is critical here to recognize that the historical and social conditions of leading a life free of external control from the Indian state are not, just series of random violent acts, but it is deeply embedded in the past of *Zomia* that Scott refers to in *The Art of Not being Governed*. The taking up of arms was to protect a way of life deeply embedded and influenced by the difference and distinctiveness of one's identity vis-à-vis the British colonizer or the postcolonial mainstream Indian state. The Naga, Mizo or Metei self's aspirations was a nostalgia for a past reality, entrenched in their social location, as they had historically always lived their lives without the external control of any entity prior to the British colonization of the region.

Oppositional struggles are fundamental to one's ability to understand the world more comprehensively and accurately. The alternative constructions and accounts which result from the process of oppositional struggle provides new ways of looking at one's world that always complicate and often challenge dominant notions of what is culturally and socially acceptable as norms. There are often questions posed about

the very political and violent nature of the literature of the North-east. Why is the language of literature about the region incapable of focusing on the other avenues and aspects of life? K.B. Veio Pou in his article "Making of a Frontier Literature" (2018) highlights that the literature of the region is rendered problematic because it fails to conform to the norms of the Indian literary tradition.

> [T]he problematic political relationship that many ethnic communities of the region have with the centre continues to affect the imagination of an inclusive India…literature from the region is categorized as different for the rest of the country in as much as any products of the society. (77)

Robin S. Ngangom in his article "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry – An Overview" has pertinently highlighted that it is impossible to be writing poetry of a romantic nature or emotionally inspired poetry of beauty under circumstances where there are "guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (299). Ngangom makes it very clear that the production of the kind of literary works that emerge from the region is not one of a deliberate and conscious choice. A poet is compelled by circumstances to write about the most pressing conditions and circumstances that defines one's existence – in other words the reality of one's lived-experiences. The poet also writes in the same article providing a re-emphasis of a similar point about the conditions in the state of Manipur that compel the poets from the region to write poetry of a political nature.

> While it may not make him or her a better writer, living with the menace of the gun does not permit the Manipuri poet to indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetics, but is a constant reminder that the poet must perforce master 'the art of witness.' (299)

Along a similar line of thought, Easterine Kire in *Bitter Wormwood* engages the reader with the idea of Mose's reluctant involvement in the fight for an independent Nagaland. It was a struggle that the Nagas approached through non-violent means by approaching Gandhi the great soul and father of the Indian nation. Gandhi's assassination comes as blow to the Nagas as he had told the Nagas that if they wanted independence, "…they had every right to it" (48). The Naga delegation's successful meeting with Gandhi, the very man who through non-violent means won India's freedom from the clutches of the British colonialists, were very hopeful for the success

of their very own cause of becoming independent. However, it was not to be. Mose's own compulsions of having to volunteer as an underground member occurs due to the conditions and circumstances that govern his life. On the occasion of the elderly Mose getting shot dead by faction members, Neilhounuo explains to Neibou that Mose's time had come. "Your grandfather was not a violent man, you know that. But he lived much of his life using the gun. *He had to*. So he has died by the gun" (241). An overwhelming majority of the undergrounds were the likes of Mose who in the name of stepping up to protect the Naga way of life did what they had to do that is take up arms. The survival of the Naga way of life was at stake as such the men had to partake in the struggle to preserve the Naga nation. It was really not a question of choice, if one was a man, he was expected to unconditionally serve the interest of the Naga people. In *Life on Hold* Roko's life is really not very different from that of Mose. Roko grows up in a hostile environment where the gun culture is at its peak especially because of the factionalism and extortions that entrenched their day-to-day lives. Why do you not get your education instead of joining the underground movement? A question that sounds very similar to why don't you write about themes other than those that have a political resonance. But one needs to take a look back at Roko's school where the corpse of a factional member is found. Mose and Neitou in *Bitter Wormwood* could no longer continue their education because the school where they were studying was more or less shut down. In fact attending school on a daily basis became a hazard to one's life and all able bodied young men had to honor their commitment of standing up for the cause of the Naga nation. Similarly, Roko, whose generation is more contemporary, in *Life on Hold* is compelled by circumstances such as the original cause and a corrupt state of affairs in Nagaland to join one of the factions. Despite his love for Nime he is compelled to hold back from their relationship. He even refuses to meet up with her for the fear that her life would be endangered. However, he leaves a message with Setuo asking him to say that he was sorry just before his well-planned impending death. "Nothing more, it was just that, tell Nime I am sorry. I figured you would understand if I told you. I thought it must be some code between you too" (104). But Nime insists "What else did he say?" (104). This message could very well have been words about Roko's immense love for Nime but their life was on hold as such that emotions like love and beauty are held ransom

by the "gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (Ngangom, "Contemporary Manipuri" 299).

Malsawmi Jacob in her poem "Roses, Tar and Blood" from *Four Gardens and Other Poems* begins by an often asked question "Why have you gone political?"/they ask, "Why don't you just do/your thing?" (lines 1-3). The poet here seems to be antagonized by the fact that a question of this nature is posed to her, most likely, not for the first time. She appears to find the question rather naïve and the truth associated with the experiences of Mizos muted. The poet's response is that of course it is fun to "sing of roses" (line 4) and "invent fanciful stories" (line 9) and that the ink with which she writes should appear as "blue as sky" (line 14). Even for the Mizos life was on hold for a long period of twenty years and it did not cease there; many lives have been burdened by what had unfolded there. "But our land is smeared with dark deeds/crimes so beastly no beast would commit" (lines 17-18). Here the poet talks about why she cannot write about the nature of poetry that is expected by the other who cannot relate to her historical and social experiences as a Mizo. Because "generation to generation" (line 22) there are lies being bred "lies that justify/treading down/part of humanity/spilling blood" (lines 23-26). Here Malsawmi Jacob addresses the reader who is an other that her pen "flows with blood" (line 27) and that "today it is someone's/tomorrow it may be yours/then you find/the colours all same" (lines 28-31). Here she alludes to the fact that what had taken place was because of differences, perhaps of race, but once blood flows out one realizes that the differences are indistinguishable. So, the answer to the question "Why have you gone political?" (line 1) is embedded in the compulsions of the Mizo experience which had been located in the suppressed reality of the troubled times of their historical past.

Robin S. Ngangom's poetry is full of instances of how difficult it is for him as a poet to attempt to write about themes that are not inspired by the reality of one's experience; even if it is political. In the poem titled "Poetry" extracted from *Words and the Silence* the poet responds to his reflection in the mirror. Ngangom often uses the mirror as a tool of juxtaposition to yoke together one's inner aspirations and desires against the truth that the reflected image throw up. "And the first reflection I saw/was my naked shame, my empty hands/and a lifetime of silence" (lines 11-13). He further alludes to how he is compelled by conditions and circumstances that focus on his "self-selected pain" (line 14) from the historical past of his land "unveiled/ by memory and

thirst" (lines 15-16). And then Ngangom says "I saw/my happiness, against a backdrop/which is sadness" (lines 15-17). In another poem titled "Poem for Three" from the anthology *Time's Crossroads* he talks about how he and his "poet-friend" are the "last of a breed" (line 36). And they are confronted with conditions and circumstances that make them "withdraw" (line 38) from their zones of comfort. "I run away from them all/craving for their friendship all the same/In these woods of autumn where our/hearts fall like leaves from trees/we die suffering and singing/" (lines 41-45). The poem "Writer" from the *The Desire of Roots* Ngangom talks about how a writer can live without many luxuries of life, however, for a writer the inability to find "expression of freedom" (line 11) makes him lose his value. At times the writer hates himself because he has to "mouth/ the ugly things and even his/bold words would seem prudish/in free worlds/" (lines 22-25). But the writer is compelled by the reality of his social location to write about concerns which may appear ugly and distasteful to people who have only experienced a life of "free worlds" (line 25). Ngangom alludes that if the writer's disposition and reality had been different "He would have pursued/the more beautiful words/skies, dances, images, discourse/trees, nudes, illumination/if he possessed the gift/of being free" (lines 30-35). The postpositivist realist perspectives allows one to appreciate the fact that through oppositional stand points emerge an understanding of the world which is different. And differences do not necessarily mean they are wrong because they do not conform to certain fixed notions of what is right and desirable. But the very experiences embedded in the oppositional struggles broadens one's perspectives and enables the other to see the world from another's vantage point.

The meanings assigned to one's experiences are undeniably conditioned by ideologies and theories through which the world around one is viewed and interpreted. However, it is not just that theories are mediated but the mediated form holds within it a "cognitive component" (Moya, "Postmodernism, Realism" 81) through which knowledge about the world is obtained. This cognitive component associated with identity allows for error and accuracy in interpreting one's experiences making provisions for the possibility of revising one's understanding of a given situation. The history of colonization of the North-east especially of the hill tribes of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur had brought about a colonial relationship that was distinct from the rest of British India. In fact, the British missionaries had contributed significantly

to the development and modernization of the communities like the Nagas and Mizos. In the case of the Mizos there is documentation of how the British administrators were not willing to provide any support whatsoever to the missionaries. As such, F.W. Savidge and J.H. Lorrain, members of the Baptist Church in London after signing an agreement with the British government in India, "…a binding agreement that they would not interfere in governmental affairs and should not expect any help from the government arrived on 11 January 1894 at Sairang..." (193). The two missionaries began their initiative in the region by learning the language of the Mizos and since "…the people did not have a script of their own, they devised an alphabet using the Roman script based on Hunterian system" (195). This move towards providing a written script to the Mizos not only proved to be highly critical in the translation of the Bible in the vernacular but also played a foundational role in the establishment, growth and development of secular education as well. When eventually the time for the British to leave the Mizo Hills came about there was a certain affinity that had evolved between the British and the Mizos. The impending departure of the British was not experienced in the same way as the rest of British India, mainly mainstream India, who were celebrating the newly found independence from the colonizers. As a part of the colonial heritage British India gained control over Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur, however, the modernization, development and the Christian faith would contribute to a postcolonial consciousness that was distinct and different from mainstream India. In fact, it was a postcolonial consciousness that saw the British as benevolent and not as an oppressive occupying force. However, within certain academic postcolonial Indian thought, there has been a distortion of this difference in temperament as being separatist in nature and that the Christian faith of the North-easterners like the Nagas is projected as a source of the conflict vis-á-vis the Indian state.

> The Nagas are also separated from the pan-Indian imaginary because of their cultural-religious difference…Over time, Christianity became a crucial part of Naga cultural identity. This also resulted in deeply held perceptions in mainland India that Naga 'separatism' is encouraged and abetted by the church and by church organizations. (Baishya 93)

These kinds of misrepresentations and distorted narratives about the Christian faith in relation to the North-east has also been circulated about the other tribal groups

such as the Mizos as well. Anup Shekar Chakraborty highlights that "…Christianity is considered to be an essential marker of tribal 'Identity' and sole reason for the secessionist and anti-nationalist overtones in the region" (8). In fact, ironically, contradictory accounts of the impact and influence of Christianity are found recorded in the novels of Easterine Kire and Malsawmi Jacob. In *Bitter Wormwood* prayers always acts as a source of comfort and consolation for the troubled times they are going through. Neibou's interaction with his grandmother reveals that the culture of vendetta that was deeply ingrained in the Naga way of life was altered by the Christian faith's teachings.

> That is the old culture, my child. We cannot live like that anymore. It will destroy us. Before our people came to Jisu, we did that. But now, we are to take our burdens to Jisu and leave it with him. Some men take it upon themselves to minister judgement. When they do that, nothing good can come of it. Leave it with Jisu. (241)

The above passage is articulated in response to Neibou's grandfather's killing, according to Naga traditions if not avenged, Neibou would be seen as lacking affections for him. It is not just a difference in changing one's perspective about the Naga way of life but also about Christianity providing well-grounded solution for the entire Naga conundrum. The Naga struggle for freedom had brought about enormous tragedy and pain in the lives of the Nagas. For Neilhounuo, the grandmother of Neibou, the answer to the Naga problem was possible through and only through the intervention of Jisu. This is despite the fact that she took active part in the Naga struggle for freedom to the point of taking arms for what she felt was an honorable cause – to protect and preserve the Naga way of life.

While the Nagas being influenced by Christian principles as an answer to their conflict continues to be true, the Mizo context, provides for an even stronger argument to the unveiling of the flawed mainstream Indian perceptions of Christianity feeding into secessionist tendencies. In fact the Peace Accord of 1986 between the Government of India and Mizoram was made possible due to the very faith that Jesus Christ inspires in the Mizo identity. There are at least two important characters in the novel *Zorami* who have been influenced deeply by Christian principles that provides one with an insight into the Mizo's Christianity and its role in informing the Mizo world view. The first one is Rinzuala a chaplain in the underground MNF army who

initially is absolutely against the idea of peace initiatives to be undertaken by the Church. He is downright against the Church's involvement as a mediator between the Government of India and the MNF. However, a series of events leads him to experiences that completely throws him off his guard. His notions of all Indian army men being ruthless and coldblooded was altered when he came across the good Sardar who guarded the prison cells where he was held in custody. His existing frame of mind about the Indian army and Indians in general "…had been jolted out of place by the Havildar. Thus he needed to re-arrange his outlook" (151). Chaplain Rinzuala is compelled to compare the missionaries F.W. Savidge and J.H. Lorrain and how they came to the Mizos who were complete strangers and of a different race but they still spread the good news of Jesus Christ's love to the Mizos. The good Sardar did not treat the Mizos as enemies even when they were in custody he showed humanity to all the prisoners alike. Rinzuala thought to himself my professing Christianity yet harboring a deep-seated hatred for all Indian army men made it impossible for him as a Mizo to find Jesus Christ in the equation between him and other Indians.

> How could the missionaries care so much for us? he thought. They went through much trouble for our sake. They worked so hard for our welfare. It's difficult to understand! If it were for their own people, it's another matter. But for us, a totally alien group…how could they? As for me, I have been hating people of other communities and teaching my people to hate them too. I have been doing just the opposite of what those missionaries did. *Ehe*! I have made a big mistake! My ideas were all wrong! (158)

Once Rinzuala is released from the prison he preached, "a new message, of God's love for all people" (158). The second one is Reverend Thanngura who takes it upon him to not only work with higher authorities of the church but also the very MNF underground leadership to work out a peaceful solution to the conflict. To this end, he leaves no stone unturned to forge a meeting with the MNF underground men even in hostile territory if necessary. When he navigates through the thick of the jungles to their secret hideouts, considered a highly secure zone, and confronts an MNF army officer his intentions are looked upon as suspect. However, the Reverend's honest and well-intentioned efforts are soon plain for even the rebel leaders to see.

> It's a long story. I've been trying to meet the MNF leaders for a long time. I don't mind telling you, I began the attempt soon after the first shootouts in Aizawl. In fact, I came close to Arakan, though I stopped short of crossing the East Pakistan border. I was hoping to contact some leaders in the MNF headquarters. (143)

After his trip to the jungle to meet the MNF undergrounds in their strongholds he returns to find that the state of affairs in Aizawl was deteriorating. Aizawl town had become a battlefield between the MNF and the Indian army. All schools, offices and shops were shutdown completely as curfews were declared. Rev. Thanngura was disturbed by the fact that the Mizo district council, the social organizations and the church remained mute throughout. He had to do something about the conflict and he was convinced that it was the church which must act to work out the peace between the MNF underground and the Indian state. Rev. Thanngura set out to meet all the Synod church committee members one by one to initiate the peace process.

> He went from house to house, trying to convince them that the church should become an agent of peace. He pleaded with them. "Jesus said, Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." We call ourselves children of God. Then how can we keep silent now? If we do not do something to bring back peace, we have no right to call ourselves Christians. (145)

The aforementioned accounts of both the Nagas and the Mizos through the novels *Bitter Wormwood* and *Zorami* are critical towards developing an appreciation for the role of the church and Christian worldviews in bringing about peaceful outcomes to the conflicts. The ceasefire between the Nagas and the Government of India has been honored by both sides for a couple of decades now. The state of Mizoram today continues to remain true to the Peace Accord of 1986 and the architects of that peace were strongly influenced by Christian values and norms. These accounts provide an error correcting platform for "deeply held perceptions in mainland India" (Baishya 93) of the church in promoting separatist tendencies. The postpositivist realist perspective provides for the interpretation of the texts against existing theories and ideologies and the process of mediation through which knowledge can be corrected. But it is not only that there is a mediated form of knowledge that one can gain from the process of enquiry into the lived-experiences of people but there is an

added cognitive component to the process of interpretation as well. This cognitive component enables one to evaluate the accuracy or otherwise, in other words, identification of error and subsequent revisability of the mediated knowledge acquired through a set of given experiences.

This chapter has been able to establish that the lived-experiences of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei people are deeply entrenched in the historical, cultural, political and social conditions and circumstances of their location. The exterior mainstream Indian gaze vis-à-vis the self's interior recognition of the North-east generates essentialist, positivist and foundationalist stances which subsequently creates oppositional dialectical stances. The chapter further derives through Husserl's phenomenology the essence of the conflict between the Indian state vis-à-vis the North-east which is based on a poetics of difference. A conflict that has generated untold violence in the region; the Indian army's operations, civilian casualties and consequent human rights atrocities, the operations of armed groups struggling for independence, the emergence of factional groups, factionally motivated killings, the increase in extortions, and the dilemma of killings within the Naga, Mizo and Meitei societies contributes to the mystification of the true nature and origins of the conflict. In other words, Husserl's phenomenology enables one to establish what the conflict is essentially all about and helps find resonance in the poetics of difference that leads one to the need to protect the Naga, Mizo or Meitei ways of life. This poetics of difference between the Indian state vis-à-vis the North-east and its dialectally motivated stances generates an impasse.

> Perhaps only one who is capable of accepting the limitation of one's culture can actually acknowledge racism. Our refusal to tolerate other's acts, which we consider offensive, forecloses, in advance, the possibility for a mutual relationship and coexistence. (Debbarma 28)

A lack of respect and appreciation for the disparate and distinct nature of the North-east's way of life by the Indian mainstream often becomes counterproductive in the effort to integrate the region into the Indian nation. The Indian state's approach to homogenize the region, many a times, without due consideration for regional distinctiveness and sentiments often adds fuel to the existing sensitivities. Subsequently, the Indian state's nation building exercises and priorities often assign the tag of identity politics to the identity assertion of the region's deeply felt need to

protect their respective identities – their sense of rootedness. As such the mainstream Indian society's position is largely perceived as antagonistic by the North-east self and one that attempts to assimilate the minority communities of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis into the pan-Indian notions of Indianness. The chapter further establishes that literary accounts of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom through real people stories and the concept of poetry of witness reflect authentic experiences of the people they represent. However, the claims of the lived-experiences as an objective source of knowledge is questioned on the ground that experiences are purely subjective and therefore unstable and unreliable. As such the postpositivist realist theories aid in providing legitimacy to the experiences of the people as an objective source of knowledge. In other words, there is restraint needed from labeling the articulation of the identity of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis merely as literary representational works of identity politics. And that the stereotyping of all voices of opposition and alternative accounts as dubious and negative contributes to creating greater schisms between the region and mainstream India which is to the detriment of keeping the nation together.

> [O]ne can locate two understandings of the state: one, it is a juridical-political entity, a formal, legal and constitutional structure of power; the other understanding is that of the state which is not a fixed but a daily experience. The state is also a historical experience that lives not just as our present experience but also as an entity that has lived with us through historical times…. (Sharma xxvi)

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Chapter V

Conclusion

This study situates marginalization in a dialectical relationship between the North-east of India, region or the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri society vis-à-vis the Indian state, center, or mainstream Indian society through the select works of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom. The select works are a representation of the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri experiences of silencing, exclusion, abnormalization and consequently marginalization. The study looks into the factors that have been involved in the construction of stereotypes and presuppositions about the North-east and its impact on the communities who have been marginalized on this basis, specifically, through the particular works of the select writers. The demographic composition of the region has the presence of the Mongoloid racial other within the borders of India's North-east, as discussed in Chapter I "Introduction." As such, it establishes the salience of the poetics of difference in the provision of a theoretical basis and tone for the study as a whole as highlighted in Chapter II "Towards a Poetics of Difference". Situating marginalization in the dialectical relationship between the North-east of India, region or Naga, Mizo or Meitei society vis-à-vis the Indian state, center, or mainstream Indian society has unveiled some critical points of conclusion that deserve due consideration.

First, the writers Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom and the select primary works bring to the fore the need to relook and redefine notions of identity, homeland and nationalism. The aforementioned writings when analyzed closely attempt to negotiate between the Indian mainstream and the margin as perspectives on how the Nagas, Mizos and Meitei are being represented and ought to be represented is brought to prominence. This unfolds in efforts to de-construct and re-construct the way in which the North-east has been stereotyped in the mainland imagination. The North-east has more often than not been projected as a region stereotypically as an other that stands in opposition to the idea of India – racially and socio-culturally different. "When Northeasterners are endowed with physical features such as a mongoloid face, it is difficult for mainland Indians to accept them as citizens of India" (Sitlhou 115). To further add to this Sitlhou and Punathil further go on to highlight that the "…racially framed margin is further imagined as less integrated to the core because of differences of cuisine, attire, and values and this denies substantial

citizenship to people of the Northeast" (115). The center has over the many decades of India's independence attempted to centralize the region while ignoring the indigeneity of the people. As such, the process of re-constructing is founded upon a sense of loss overwhelmingly imposed upon the region by the modular notions of canonical Indian identity – the fixed idea of Indianness which excludes the North-easterner. The select works depict the attempt by the writers to recover that loss as highlighted in the theoretical considerations of Chapter II "Towards a Poetics of Difference." Post India's independence its nation-building projects assumed that the North-east must naturally conform to a shared postcolonial consciousness with the rest of mainstream Indian society. Jangkhomang Guite talks about how "… 'not to see' the 'others', the minority communities in the state were a part of the stated policy of the new social reconstruction process which would 'see' only the linear rise to power of the politically dominant community" (82). However, the postcolonial consciousness of the North-east was different and continues to be different over the many decades of India's independence especially among the hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. This rather uninformed assumption that what constitutes a certain idea of the Indian nation may be applied to the region without taking into account the sensitivity of the unique social, cultural and historical conditions that define the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri identity becomes highly questionable. This strongly hints at efforts towards complete erasure of localized and indigenous attributes of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei identity, put differently, a complete detachment from essentialized notions of social and cultural specificities associated with their respective ways of life. This is reflected in the discussions presented in Chapter III "Exterior's Gaze and Self's Interior Recognition" where modular notions of social, cultural and political norms are imposed on the colonized by the West. Smith highlights that "…the one doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define" (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 67). Benedict Anderson's definition of what a nation ought to be is set as a model for postcolonial nations, like India, derived from a European template is heavily criticized and objected by Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee is absolutely against the idea of restricting India's imagined community to "…certain modular forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas…" (5). He continues to argue that it effectively leaves the postcolonial Indian, independent of the physical colonial rule of the British, but with no power to imagine a nation for itself. In the context of the North-

east it takes on a template definitive of an Indo-centric modular notion of Indianness which is unapologetically imposed upon the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri communities. This rather insensitive dismissal and exclusion of elements of particularized indigeneity closely associated with Naga, Mizo and Meitei idea of self, from the pan-Indian modular notions of a nation, otherizes, abnormalizes and excludes the North-easterner. In Kire's selected novels there is a strong belief that Naga Hills was not a part of India. The Naga consciousness occupies a space of difference that finds itself detached from an imagined nationalism that is different from the one imagined by the Indian mainstream. Similar to the Nagas, in Jacob's selected works, the Mizo consciousness saw itself as distinct, a racially distinct other when juxtaposed against the Indian race. The Mizo self saw itself as an identity indigenous and distinct from the Indian other just as the Indian self sees an other in the North-easterner. In the Mizo hills as in Kire's Naga hills, the Indian army is seen to be an occupying force and their respective lands as a homeland that needs to be made free of external control. The characters like Mose, Neituo, Roko, Nikhuma and Lalawmpuia all pursue the dreams of becoming independent and self governing. Ngangom's poetry also draws up images of the Meitei self being under external control. The poet often finds himself under shackles unable to determine the course of his own life which is representative of the Meitei lives. He refers to the loss of traditional values and fragmentation of homes and often laments that his beloved home is now under chains. Moreover, there are allusions to situations where there is an external or outside force that grips their land where the language of poetry is no longer free flowing. As such the images evoke an occupation of Manipur by external forces and elements. In a way a disorientation resulting from forced coming together of the Indian race and the Mongoloid race and the subsequent loss of touch with one's idea of the self.

It becomes important at this stage to attempt to unravel the reason behind this poetics of difference that makes the Naga, Mizo and Meitei imagine a homeland and nation that is different from the pan-Indian notions. It is but crucial to head back to the precolonial and colonial history of the social and cultural location of the North-east. The North-easterner's idea of a nation primarily remains fixed on the primordial nature of subsistent existence of the people of the region through James C. Scott's reference to the historic *Zomia* (36). *Zomia* is also referred to as the Southeast Asian *masif* which he terms as one of the largest or in fact largest relatively "stateless" (87) or "non-state"

(59) regions of the world. The landmass in question historically is described to have included parts of China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and parts of North-east India.

> Beyond merely taking advantage of their geographical isolation from centers of state power, much of *Zomia* has resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged. (Scott 19)

The self-governing nature of the hill people and their autonomy from the lowlands of the modern-day states was defined by the inaccessibility of their terrain, where the villages were small and far between and compact, dense and impenetrable jungles happened to surround them. This landscape made it favorable for the people groups occupying the non-state hilly spaces to lead a life of isolation away from the influences of those occupying the plains of the modern-day states. However, the attack on territories belonging to colonial British India by the Burmese who had captured outposts near the town of Sylhet resulted in violent confrontations in the year 1824. The war between the British and Burma ended with the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 and the territories of Assam, Manipur, Cachar and the remaining parts of North-east India came under the colonial rule of the British. The British always considered the governing of the North-east the ruler's nightmare as creating a politically governable subject in the region was characterized by numerous challenges. To establish and make the North-east populace a part of a political order meant that the wandering population will eventually have to be placed within the confines of their homelands. Confining the populace to a particular area in the frontier which was often a zone of transition only confirmed that a boundary is merely a line drawn on the ground and on a map.

> [O]ne has to broaden the geographical and historical area that includes broadly the present Northeast India and its neighboring areas….The outside could be represented either as a space of ethnic origin of people living inside the state of India or as a shared historical and political consciousness of belongingness in a bigger imagined ethnic homeland. (Sharma xx)

Samir Kumar Das highlights that the North-east as a frontier "…consisted of people most of whom could not be governed – the ungovernable from whom they were required to protect the governed – their subjects" (22). As such, this resulted in the British non-interference policy with the affairs of certain tribal peoples of the hills of

the North-east. The enforcement of the Inner Line regulation in 1873 by the British authorities was the "…limit up to which the district officer's regular jurisdiction ran and up to which they were supposed to maintain law and order" (Das 25). This meant that the Naga hills and Lushai hills (also known as Mizo hills) were beyond the inner line where the provisions of the state was not functional. Tilottoma Misra draws one attention to the fact that when the British took control of the North-east, its policy towards the hills tribes, was one of non-interference that was already being practiced by the Ahoms of the Assam plains towards the hills.

> The British when they took over the administration of Assam in the early nineteenth century, continued the same policy of non-interference towards the hill people of the frontier regions. (217-18)

The annexation of the Ahom kingdom of Assam occurred coincidently during the time, when in 1833, the vital tea trade with China for the British was disrupted. The possibility of Assam as a favorable region for growing and sustaining the highly profitable tea commerce was explored to a resounding success by the British stakeholders. "The coming of the tea industry meant the clearing of the uncultivated lands – labelled as wastelands – and forests for tea plantations" (Choudhury 15). The notion of wastelands is linked to the doctrine of discovery or "terra nullius" (Sen 948) as put forward by Robert J. Miller which refers to the act of treating indigenous lands as "empty lands" or "no-one's land" (Sen 946). The labelling of large parts of Assam as wastelands where tea plantations were to be set up was to bring the British in contact with indigenous people of the region who claimed ancestral ownership over the said empty lands. It also contributed to the introduction of migrant laborers from other parts of India to work in the tea plantations. It is critical to note here that this phenomenon of migrants from other parts of India settling in the empty or waste lands of the North-east of India was to continue long after India's independence feeding into future conflicts of the region determined by outsiders versus insiders debate. The efforts towards further development of the profitable tea commerce led to expansionist moves by the British colonialists that led to the deeper and deeper encroachment of the ancestral forests and lands of the indigenous peoples of the region. These expansionist moves eventually resulted in violent confrontations where raids were conducted by the tribes like the Nagas and Mizos on British tea plantations in the act of protecting one's homeland. Over a period of time, with increasing frequency of these raids, the

British were compelled by what they designated as disruptive raids to pacify the hill tribes of the Nagas and Mizos – consequently successful military expeditions helped the British gain control over the hills of the Nagas and Mizos. The British administration in the regions of the Naga and Mizo hills was restricted to keep the tea commerce robust and profitable, as for the Nagas and Mizos, the purpose was to restrict them from disrupting the tea plantations. "The frontiers were conceived by the colonial ethnographers, as the means of keeping the tribal raiders at bay" (Das 23). Subsequently, the Christianization and modernization of the Nagas and Mizos had taken place. As time passed, the British came to the conclusion that tribes like the Nagas and Mizos were starkly different from the Indian race and as such the Government of India Act 1935 was passed to place the Naga and Lushai Hills (now Nagaland and Mizoram respectively) under the excluded areas which meant that the Indian government did not have any jurisdiction over the said hill regions. In the Manipuri scenario, in the year 1939, due to a movement against the non-Manipuri traders who began to take control of the local market to the angst of the Meiteis, the British colonial rulers introduced the inner line permit system to protect the interest of the indigenous people of Manipur. Under this system all non-Manipuris from other parts of India, designated as outsiders, had to seek permission from the British colonial government before entering Manipur. To sum up, in effect, this meant the non-interference in the direct affairs of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis by the colonial British which created conditions and circumstances that supported autonomous mode of existence that respected the difference of the region vis-à-vis mainstream Indian society. Eventually, when India gained its independence from the British, the people groups from Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur nurtured the aspirations of becoming independent of Indian control over their respective indigenous regions. The Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis in aspiring to be free of external control were driven by the thought that took them to a precolonial past of *Zomia* before the British had come into contact with them. This precolonial past is the past that Scott refers to in his seminal work *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) in the case of the Nagas and Mizos of the "uplands" (35) and for the Meiteis who operated as an independent kingdom in the "lowlands" (157).

> One draws upon a notion of authenticity, of a time before colonization in which we were intact as indigenous peoples. We had absolute

> authority over lives; we were born into and lived in a universe which was entirely our lives; we were born into and lived in a universe which was entirely our making. (Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* 26)

Second, the role of the select writers is critical in the way they represent the circumstances and conditions of the people of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. How they act on behalf of the people articulating their lived-experiences, and present to the world beyond, indigenous perspectives of rootedness to their respective culture. The importance of the role of the intellectual in representational acts for the marginalized is highlighted by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subalterns Speak?" first published in the year 1983. This groundbreaking essay provides for a foundation for erstwhile silenced voices of the peripheries, empowering them, to articulate their perspectives as discussed in Chapter III "Exterior's Gaze and Self's Interior Recognition." Though there are a number of writers already publishing in the vernaculars, however, literature written in the English language occupies a position of greater prominence and accessibility to a broader national and global readership. As such Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom become critical to the needs of the masses that they represent through their acts of writings in English which portray unaccounted for realities embedded in the North-east of India. This is where a poetics of difference unfolds dialectically between the mainstream Indian society or the Indian state vis-a-vis the people of the region as highlighted in Chapter II "Towards a Poetics of Difference." The differences that the North-east and its people exhibit in terms of physical appearance and other social and cultural traits is otherized and considered as not representative of the idea of who an Indian ought to be. In fact, the Indian state's approach was undertaken with the effort to ensure that the people groups of the North-east were guided by a vision of nationalist uniformity with the rest of the country and indigenous traits were marginalized for lack of conformity to the privileged model, in other words, the Indian *bios*. Agamben's references to *bios* and *zoé* is further made relevant here as a parallel can be drawn between the privileged model of the Indian *bios* "the qualified life of a citizen" (60) as opposed to *zoé* which is just "bare anonymous life" (60). The concept of *zoé* can clearly be assigned to the North-easterner whose identity is discriminated and abnormalized by the mainstream Indian *bios*. This was unfortunately to result in violent confrontations of indigenous rights struggles, regionalist agitations and armed oppositions against the nascent

postcolonial Indian state. Borgohain highlights that the "…nation state based on national identity was seen as an all embracing inter-class collectivity, a super community with no internal contradictions" (12). Monalisa Changkija states that fair treatment to the people of the North-east will always be denied if the indigenous value systems are "…perceived from the lens of colonial India or Independent India" (135). Saikia and Baishya allude to the North-east region and how "…its inhabitants are approached through the lens of violence and exceptionality…" (5). As such, there is dire need for authentic efforts to unveil the stereotypes of the North-east that is projected as a land where violence is a basic trait of the people of the region. Bijukumar highlights a very critical point which stresses on "…the assertion of ethnic identity and the accompanying extremist tendencies are related to the feeling of losing one's own identity, marginalization and exploitation by others" (29). Notions around the protection and preservation of the ancestral homelands from outsiders is believed to be for a good and honorable cause – the protection of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei way of life. The armed rebellions, regionalist agitations and indigenous rights movements are ways in which the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis attempt to voice their angst and articulate their socio-historical past that defined a past life free of external control. The Indian state however decided to engage with this indigenous expression of rootedness to the Naga, Mizo and Meitei identity through a military and law and order approach. Tilttoma Misra depicts a stance that is in complete opposition to Nehru's statement about the people of the North-east during the early years of independence "…people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them" (219). Despite Nehru's close affiliation with Mahatma Gandhi a man known for his peaceful ways and methods the heavy increase in the military capacity of the Indian state in Nagaland and the use of the Indian air force in Aizawl town in the Mizo Hills calls into question the veracity of his overall ideological commitments. Nari Rustomji who was posted in the North-east in the initial years of India's independence, "…provides perhaps the most perceptive account of the paradox of a Mahatma Gandhi-inspired nationalist government resorting to heavy military means to suppress the tiny Naga resistance at appalling human cost to ordinary Nagas" (Subramanian 17). As highlighted in Chapter III "Exterior's Gaze and Self's Interior Recognition" the overall ambience in the Naga Hills had changed overnight as the ever-increasing military presence becomes a matter of critical concern for the villagers

in Mose's town. As it was in the case of Mose, most of the Naga civilian populations chose to volunteer for the Naga war of independence only when they felt that it had become a question of loss of Naga honor, integrity, survival and existence. What was a Naga indigenous rights struggle, over a period of time, descended into an armed oppositional struggle against the Indian state. In the case of the Mizoram, the negligence shown towards Mizo populace's sufferings during the *mautam* famine to the point of death was capitalized to stir up politically dormant yet sensitive flames. However, the formidable use of the mighty Indian air force against what India called its own citizens in order to quash the resistance sends a rather deafening message. It bombed the town of Aizawl as though it was at war with a foreign country. The conditions and circumstances became rife for regional identity-based movements as Manipur too depicts a history of coerced entry to the Indian Union. The longing that the Meiteis harbor for the past traditions and roots are depicted in the poems of lament and cultural loss throughout the select anthologies. Often there is a nostalgic reference to the kingdom of Kangleipak where the Meitei imagined a glorified past of their lived experience as embedded in a desire for their roots. Borgohain discusses how the diversity, differences and grievances in the North-east was not given the due respect it deserved and was the fundamental cause leading to armed conflicts.

> The tendency was to ignore the plurality of nations, their identities and histories and to stress on one history, language, social project, cultural models, in short one nation identity. (12)

The regionalist agitations in the Naga hills, Mizo hills and Imphal valley were labelled by the Indian state as moves by disgruntled and disloyal subjects to break away in secession from India. The Naga, Mizos and Meiteis were over a period of time were introduced to the infamous Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 by the Indian state. Though the invocation of AFSPA was directed towards what the center defined as insurgent and anti-India rebels the law soon overwhelmed the entire populations of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei communities. A law like AFSPA which creates a state of exception turns into a nightmare for the entire civilian population of the region and was to have a tremendous impact on future relationship between the Indian mainstream and the region. A biopolitical management of the lives of the entire Naga, Mizo or Meitei population who were placed under a law that treated one's life as "bare anonymous life" (Agamben 60) or *zoé*. To borrow from Agamben the Naga,

Mizo or Meitei life could be placed under an extraordinary law which in effect removed the rule of law from the region. Sanjib Baruah highlights the use of AFSPA in the region by the Indian state as problematic because of the following reason.

> India's human rights record in the region is unenviable. How many democracies in the world would allow security forces to 'fire upon or otherwise use force even to the extent of causing death', then give legal immunity to security personnel for their action and leave no room for independent investigation of such incidents. (20)

Subramanian speaks about how the security forces often resorted to high-handed action to manage and control the situation in the region during searches, operations and ambushes. "Frequent failures to take action against misuse of powers by security forces do tend to tarnish the image of these forces" (56). As discussed in Chapter III "Exterior's Gaze and Self's Interior Recognition" represented through the select writings elderly women who are working in the fields were shot dead by the army to angst and pain of the family members. There are other incidents where innocent young men going about their work were killed on the mere grounds of what the soldier decided was suspicious behavior. The experiences of the common people was such that they could be picked up by army men at any time and their fate was unknown. The rule of law was completely absent as a state of exception was forced upon the region. The Indian army would vent out their anger at the innocent villagers because they often failed to catch hold of the armed rebel groups. It was much easier to attack the civilians in the villages as acts of retaliation then pursue the armed rebel groups in the thick of jungles. Women especially became vulnerable to the exercise of violent and criminal acts of torture and sexual abuse by the army. All three writers explicitly deal with the theme of army brutality against women who were sexually abused and this generated deep seated resentments in the civilian populace. All these lived experiences of the common people of the region continue to remain well and alive in their historical past of the troubled times and further continue to inform their present of today. Sanjib Baruah, goes to highlight that, "In terms of respect for basic freedoms, the rule of law and principles of accountability and transparency, there is a significantly diminished form of democracy in Northeast India today" (19).

Third, the challenge for the North-east is fraught with challenges in overcoming the stereotypes and presuppositions generated externally about the region.

Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom present the insider's account of the Naga, Mizo and Manipuri experiences one that is driven by the self's interior recognition as addressed in Chapter III "Exterior's Gaze and Self Interior's Recognition." Easterine Kire in her article "Writing from the heart" (2018) asserts that people groups in the North-east go through many "definitions" (11) which "label us" (11) and how such labels become "constructed identities" (13) or stereotypes about the people of the region. She stresses upon the need to "write outside the box" (11) as one has to break the externally generated constructs about the self and recognize one's own truths. The constructs that Kire refers to have not only become the norms that define the North-easterner through exterior gaze of mainstream India but also become the very norms by which the Naga, Mizo or Meitei self sees recognize themselves. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology stresses on the "natural attitude" (Zahavi 51) and how one's perception of seeing the world is grounded in it. In effect it is the stereotypes and presuppositions that affect the way an object or event is perceived or one's established way of interpreting one's experience to the point that it becomes the norm. According to Husserl, this natural attitude must be questioned, a questioning of what was previously taken for granted. In other words, he suggests that one must wonder at what appears to be most familiar – the ability to look at the world with "new eyes" (Schmitt 239). To be able to perform this act of questioning what was taken for granted before, one needs to suspend or bracket all existing knowledge, that naturally characterize the object of enquiry or event in question. The purpose of the exercise is to get to the very essence of the object, event or phenomenon as discussed in Chapter IV "Breaking the Impasse."

The characters in Kire's novels are perturbed by the fact their fight for independence, as time passes by, loses clarity about the original cause. The older generation who had begun the struggle for independence based on the need to protect and preserve their particular ways of life were disappointed in the new turn of events. The rumors that they heard were becoming more and more established as truths. The killings within the factions became visible as targeted killings of Nagas by other Nagas began to surface ever more frequently. They came across young men who frequently demanded money from business establishments at the threat of the gun. Even small business establishments were not spared and the extortionists claimed that the funds collected was to support the freedom struggle associated with the Naga cause,

however, no one really knew the exact truth. It became very difficult to function in the climate of distrust and fear created by factions, factional killings and extortions. Jacob unravels the violence that unfolds in her works where certain characters become informers for the Indian army. They had to spy on their fellow Mizos to the stop the extreme torture faced under the custody of the army. The army relentlessly demanded that more and more people must be identified and the intensity of the tortures increased to get informers talking. Circumstances and conditions got to a point where accusations towards innocent civilians became the trend to save oneself from the excruciatingly painful interrogation process. This created a climate of distrust and fear where innocent civilians were being picked up by army men for no legitimate reason. However, there are other such characters who remained steadfast and undeterred from the original cause. Those who refused to let the freedom struggle be reduced to Mizos killing Mizos. Ngangom also presents the sense of despair, distrust and suspicion that evolves out of the regionalist agitations of the Meiteis. The conflict between the Indian state and home-grown struggles for a free Manipur, devoid of external control, is entrenched in inexplicable violence and bloodshed. He talks about how the land and people of Manipur are frequently traded off for personal and selfish gains, in effect, suggesting the people's betrayal of the original cause. A scenario which is not dissimilar to both the Naga and Mizo conditions where Meiteis are pitted against other Meiteis to point of killing each other. According to Husserl, understanding the essence of the object of enquiry in relation to the Naga, Mizo or Meitei conflict is defined by the need to transcend the natural attitude which means one needs to be in a state of "presuppositionlessness" (Zahavi 44). The natural attitude is inclined towards defining the Naga, Mizo or Meitei conflicts through stereotypes and presuppositions that characterize the conflict from externally constructed perspectives about the region – savage and brutal violence. "Our relation to the world is so profound and so intimate that the only way for us to notice it is to suspend its movement, to refuse our complicity or to render it inoperative" (Merleau-Ponty 64). Towards this effort, the many complex layers of violence that has resulted from the conflict between the Nagas, Mizos and the Meiteis vis-à-vis the center needs a close and careful examination. In the process, there is a need to suspend and bracket all forms of violence, atrocities, betrayals, vendettas and extortions that have marred the original cause. The essence was always about protecting and preserving the Naga, Mizo or Meitei way of life. As such, the

Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis have always nurtured a strong affiliation with their respective homelands which had resulted in the son of the soil conceptual framework towards maintaining the sanctity of their homeland. Satya P. Mohanty highlights the "…need to reconstruct what our relevant community might have been, appreciate the social and historical dimensions of our innermost selves" (47). The need to work one's way through all the unessential attributes of the conflict which leads the mind astray from the vantage point of seeing the object of enquiry in question. This connect to the innermost selves is in fact in line with Husserl's essence i.e., going back to the "things themselves" (Zahavi 17). Smith further draws one's attention to the need for "…reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground" (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 79). The self-givenness of the essence of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei identity as such is a revivalist approach towards one's indigeneity and how to protect that indigenous way of life from the ever-present threat to the survival of cultural minorities.

Fourth, while the differentiation on the essentialist, foundationalist and positivist notions of the Indian mainstream and the North-east self has its significance and place, one must recognize, the need to create communication between the essentialisms of the two stances. In the poem "The Ignominy of Geometry" extracted from the anthology *The Desire of Roots* Ngangom directs one's attention to "the inability to evade angles and parallels" (line 2). The poet makes an assertion that the discipline of geometry as structured as it might be cannot deny the subtle anomalies that form a part of its existence. He further highlights that the way one approaches differences with the other requires a communication that can perhaps measure lives that are imprecise, "when two people cannot agree (naturally)/they are diametrically opposed/bowing again to geometry/a language of precision/to measure our imprecise lives" (lines 12-16). While the importance of representation is undeniably significant and Spivak's inputs encourage the margins to articulate their lived-experiences nevertheless the act of speaking up can only be meaningful if what is being spoken is heard. J. Maggio's "Can the Subaltern be Heard?" plays a critical role in helping establish for the study the importance of the listener. In other words, Maggio looks at Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" from the perspective of a communicative role between the subaltern and the dominant other as discussed in Chapter II "Towards a Poetics of Difference." Maggio's take on Spivak's famous essay

can be interpreted to the need to recognize the importance of appreciating the reality that cultural disparities exist. And the subaltern to be enabled to speak translates into the need, on part of the dominant community, to restrain from homogenizing the other into the cultural norms of the self. It is the disparate realities of the North-east that are different and distinct from the mainstream Indian society which contribute to experiences and identity that question standardized notion of pan-Indian sameness. The articulation or act of speaking up is not just an attempt to question the idea of Indianness but efforts to stir the mainstream imagination to include particularities associated with the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis within the idea of Indianness. Stuart Hall makes emphasis on the significance of differences in the constitution of one's identity, in fact he stresses that identities "…are constructed through, not outside difference" (17). In other words, to accept the North-easterner as a part of India, without expecting total assimilation, where the Naga, Mizo and Meitei is not coerced to become estranged from one's own traditions and roots. To this end, theoretical considerations from postpositivist reality are explored to help establish the need to find objectivity and truth in both the socially constructed experiences and the reality of experiences embedded in the geographical and social location of the North-east through the representational efforts of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom. As such, postpositivist realism avoids essentialist, positivist and foundationalist attempt to engage with knowledge that guarantees absolute certainty and rejects postmodernism's extreme skepticism towards the reliability of theoretically mediated interpretations of socially constructed knowledge. There are three postpositivist realists premises that have been taken into consideration for the present study. The first is that different social categories such as race and culture which make up an individual's social location are causally related to the experiences that an individual will have. The second, postpositivist realist premise is that it is characterized by a cognitive component to the understanding of identity which creates a space for error and accuracy in the interpretation of one's experiences therefore enabling the revision of one's understanding of a given situation. The third, is the premise that oppositional struggle is fundamental to the building one's capacity to understand the world more accurately. Alternative constructions and accounts generated through the process of oppositional struggle open up new ways of looking at one's world that often complicate and challenge dominant conceptions of what is

right, true and beautiful. These three post positivist realist perspectives provide for both the ground for representation of the subaltern and also the need for the subaltern to be heard.

> [L]iterary reading is a setting-to-work for an interrogation and deconstruction of images of self in the encounter with radical alterity, and a mode to imaginatively train oneself to detect the trace of the other. (Baishya 23)

The poetics of difference effectively plays out here as the social categories of race and culture that deeply influence the nature of the experiences that the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis have had to undergo. The struggles for freedom from the Indian state in each of the respective cases has been established by the fact that there is a deep need to protect one's indigenous way of life. This xenophobic fear is grounded on the reality of a stark difference between the region and the Indian state. Chakraborty reifies the point of difference that, "…the people of Northeast India, especially the tribal people, differ from the plains people of India in respect of culture, customary behavior, faith and race" (6). In *Bitter Wormwood* the external mainstream Indian gaze of Rakesh in responding to the discrimination faced by North-easterners in Delhi is evident when he blurts out to Neibou, Mose's grandson, "But Neibou, you are not really Indian! I mean it is so clear to me that you are not" (208). Later in the novel, Rakesh's visit to Nagaland makes him admit to himself that, "…to be in Naga towns and villages seemed like being in another country altogether" (220). This difference of race undeniably influences the experience of discrimination and exclusion from the definitions of Indianness. Moreover, there is a rejection of the literary output from the region because it reflects a temperament that does not express a postcolonial consciousness that aligns to the Indian literary canon but rather a difference and departure from the canon. The history of the region, especially during the colonial period, was predominantly based on a non-antagonistic relationship with the British and therefore the nationalist Indian freedom struggle from the British was a largely non-existent experience for the Naga, Mizo or Meitei communities.

There is a cognitive component built into the mediated form of knowledge about the world. This cognitive component associated with identity allows for error and accuracy in interpreting one's experiences making it possible for revision of one's perception about a given situation or condition. The British missionaries

proselytization of the Nagas and Mizos and the high percentage of Christians among the two communities is often treated with suspect. Once the British departed from India they had left behind a strong culture of the Christian faith among the Nagas and the Mizos which contributes to a poetics of difference in the relationship with mainstream Indian society. Almost the entire populations of the Nagas and Mizos conform to the Christian faith and as such there are mainstream Indian claims of Christianity as being a source of conflict in the North-east. Chakraborty highlights that "…Christianity is considered to be an essential marker of tribal 'identity' and sole reason for the secessionist and anti-nationalist overtones in the region." (8) Contrary to the above account, in Jacob's *Zorami* the church ministers were the active voices pushing for a peaceful solution to the conflict during the Mizo armed struggle for independence between the Indian state vis-à-vis the MNF. The Christian faith's ideological foundation promotes a message of God's love for all no matter what race. Chaplain Rinzuala preached, "…a new message of God's love for all people" (158). The British missionaries and their proselytization of the Mizos is endearingly recollected and despite the Mizos' being an entirely different race the missionaries still spread the good news of Jesus Christ's love and salvation to the Mizos. The principles of Christianity that governed the thoughts of the erstwhile church leaders and the Mizo populace, as such was critical, in paving the way for the Peace Accord of 1986 between the Mizos and the Indian state. The same agreement is touted to be one of the most successful peace agreements across the world.

Oppositional struggles provide an understanding and an appreciation of the world through alternative experiences and accounts. It complicates and challenges the dominant notions of what is "right", "true" and "beautiful" (Moya 44). There are often questions posed about the political nature of the literature from the North-east. K.B. Veio Pou highlights that, "…literature from the region is categorized as different from the rest of the country in as much as any products of the society" (77). Robin S. Ngangom discusses in the article "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry – An Overview" how difficult it is to write poetry of romantic nature under the circumstances where there are "guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (299). In the poem, "Writer" from the *The Desire of Roots* Ngangom discusses how a writer can manage without the incentives of life, however, being unable to express one's freedom is disorienting experience. The writer hates himself because he has to

"mouth/the ugly things and even his/bold words would seem prudish/in free worlds" (lines 22-25). But the writer is compelled by the "reality" (line 28) of his socio-political location to represent the concerns which may appear to be distasteful to people who have only experienced a life of "free worlds" (line 25). Ngangom alludes that if the "reality" (line 28) was different the writer's disposition would have the freedom to pursue, "the more beautiful words,/skies, dances, images, discourse,/trees, nudes, illumination,/if he possessed the gift/of being free" (lines 31-35). The postpositivist realist perspectives as such provide platforms for appreciating the differences and distinctiveness through oppositional standpoints. An understanding of the world which is different and that differences do not necessarily mean they are wrong because they do not conform to the other's notions of what is right.

Fifth, however, an invocation of the essentialist Naga, Mizo or Meitei identity of the North-east becomes somewhat problematic as the nation-building efforts of the Indian state is burdened with its own priorities. In fact efforts towards nation-building are characterized by a rather homogenizing notion of the mainstream Indian essentialism which creates an impasse. In the poem "The Ignominy of Geometry" from *The Desire of Roots* presents this dichotomy of the impasse between the mainstream Indian society and the region. Ngangom stresses on how "The ignominy of geometry/the inability to see beyond centers and triangles" (lines 27-28) contributes to a certain kind of blindness to alternate ways of seeing the world as discussed in Chapter IV titled "Breaking the Impasse." The Indian state sees the essentialism of the region as problematic as the focus on Naga, Mizo or Meitei experiences promote what the center considers identity politics. An identity politics characterized by narrow and selfish interests of regional and localized nature that loses touch with the larger pan-Indian identity. The center's argument is that a heavy emphasis on a poetics of difference determining a particular way of life defined by the Naga, Mizo or Meitei experiences can potentially lead to the balkanization of the Indian nation. As such assimilation of the Naga, Mizo or Meitei identities to the larger mainstream Indian society is desirable. It is, however, critical to note that Dominick La Capra alludes to how identity politics should not "…be conflated with identification in the sense of total fusion with others wherein difference is obliterated and criticism is tantamount to betrayal" (43). The attempt to completely assimilate another in the "sense of total fusion" where "difference is obliterated" becomes highly problematic due to the

tension created in minority identity groups who claim that homogenizing tendencies marginalize or puts them at a disadvantage. Moore asserts that this becomes more intensified in a scenario where there is a strong identification of the majority national group with "a particular 'thick' culture or religion, and seeks to create unity by extending that cultural expression across the country" (99). Nationalist tendencies that aggressively seek to build an identity without accommodating the sentiments of minority cultures creates the fear of assimilation. Apparently, such aggressive threats towards minority groups has the possibility of engendering the need for self-determination, self-governance and even secession to protect one's identity and way of life. Moore explores this sensitive space and suggests that there is a "need for a thin, political identity" (100). A thin political identity where one's regional identity is not seen as an impediment towards the expression of one's national identity.

> Gandhi wrote that India's prayer should not be 'God, give him the light that thou hast given me' but, rather 'Give him all the light and truth he needs for his highest development.' This readiness to concede to a fellow citizen the right to follow his own light became the foundation of both secularism and national unity. (Singh 263)

In effect, there is a need to broaden the concept of what constitutes the idea of being an Indian. The regional and localized identities should not be discriminated and excluded from the notions of Indianness. One should be capable of being a Bengali, Punjabi, Oriya, Naga, Mizo or Meitei and an Indian at the same time. Sanjoy Hazarika in his book *Strangers No More* (2018) speaks about how the new generation of North-easterners are engaging themselves with the idea of India. This new generation of the young from North-east communities are attempting to gauge their relationship with India, raising questions, on whether the idea of India includes the Naga, Mizo or Meitei within its folds of definition.

As highlighted in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the situating of marginalization restricts itself dialectically to the oppositional engagement between the Indian state, nation, center, mainstream Indian society vis-à-vis the North-east, region, periphery and Naga, Mizo or Meitei society. The North-east in itself is a term that may mislead one to assume that it is a homogenous entity whereas the heterogeneities that exist on the ground are inexplicable. Moreover, there are cultural minority groups that form a part of the demographic composition of each of the states

of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur which create grounds for further critical inquiry into the study of marginalization within the aforementioned respective states. There is also further scope of critical inquiry into the region as a place of relationship with those across international borders where kith and kin of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis ethnic groups reside. A critical literary inquiry into the space of border aesthetics to develop a more nuanced understanding of the people groups that live on both sides of the cartographic delineation between the Indian state and its neighbors on the east. Another, critical enquiry of marginalization that deserves due attention is of mainstream Indian lived-experiences of living in states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. What are the challenges of living among the people groups like the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis? Which brings to the fore critical theories related to the need of diasporic theoretical considerations for studying marginalization in a dialectical relationship of the Indian state and its North-east.

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ABSTRACT

SITUATING MARGINALIZATION IN NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE, MALSAWMI JACOB AND ROBIN S. NGANGOM

AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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SITUATING MARGINALIZATION IN NORTHEAST INDIA THROUGH SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE, MALSAWMI JACOB AND ROBIN S. NGANGOM

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In partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies of Mizoram University, Aizawl

This study situates marginalization in a dialectical relationship between the North-east of India, region or the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri society vis-à-vis the mainstream Indian society through the select works of Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom. The primary texts for the present study are Easterine Kire's novels *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and *Life on Hold* (2011); Malsawmi Jacob's novel *Zorami* (2015) and book of poetry *Four Gardens and Other Poems* (2017); and Robin S. Ngangom's anthologies of poetry *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). Stanco Pelc's reference to United Nations University's definition delineates the following attributes of marginalization, "geographical remoteness, peripheral to the most highly developed and populous areas of a country; dispersed heterogenous populations of minority ethnic groups living at subsistence levels; actual or perceived lack, or low levels, of physical and social infrastructure, and populations with little or no political influence on the decisions affecting their lives" (17). Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines the term marginalization as "To relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group." This particular definition depicts the presence and pressure of an external agency to act upon people i.e.,'to relegate' strongly suggests the role of power and exercise of authority in the marginalization of people groups. Margins are very often used synonymously with terms like edge, boundary, periphery, fringe, and border. When conceptualizing the margins or marginalization one is confronted upfront with the pronounced presence of a center. A center from which the margins are decided and established; the farther one is located from the center the more marginalized one is likely to become. As such, marginalization of an individual or group may manifest itself in various forms such as social marginalization, cultural marginalization, religious marginalization, psychological marginalization, economic marginalization and political marginalization. People that are culturally or ethnically different can be marginalized by another cultural community in all of the above manners. This is because a society functions through rituals, value systems and norms. While the term marginalization may be defined and explained in various ways it must be understood that at a very fundamental level marginalization can in fact be explained as a consequence of a system that produces inequality, exclusion or abnormality.

> A 'marginal' position is therefore the starting point of marginality research…. When we are talking about regions or certain areas being in such position we would normally use a notion marginal regions

> (areas) and the process of putting them in such position is therefore marginalization. Finally the basic characteristic of such regions (areas – social groups, societies) is marginality. (Pelc 13)

The select works are representations of silencing, exclusion, discrimination, abnormalization and marginalization that have resulted from the conflict-ridden spaces of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis in North-east India. The presentation of the conflicts by the center in the North-east has predominantly been of a certain exceptionality that characterizes the people of the region and is subsequently linked to insurgency, rebellions and violence against the Indian state. This condition of exceptionality is in fact what provides a foundational basis for the study as it translates into the presence of an undeniable poetics of difference between the center and the region. As a result misrepresentations and distortions of the lived experiences of the people of the region become normalized through certain stereotypes and presuppositions. The study looks into the factors that have been involved in the construction of these stereotypes and presuppositions about the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis and its impact on these communities who have been marginalized on this basis. Most importantly, this research articulates literary accounts of representations that focus on the indigenous voices of the Nagas, Mizos and Meteis.

Chapter I: Introduction

The introductory chapter provides a background of the North-east of India highlighting how it is located in a liminal region that is ninety-eight percent international border with China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. How it is a landlocked region comprising of eight states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region's land-based access to the rest of India is through what is popularly known as the 'chicken neck' or 'Siliguri corridor' that runs from an east to west direction, sandwiched by Bhutan on the north and Bangladesh on the south. The demographic composition of the North-east has the presence of the Mongoloid racial other which feeds into a persistent poetics of difference. During the colonial period, Robert Reid, the governor of the state of Assam from 1937 to 1942 highlights the conspicuous difference between people of North-east India and India proper, "…that neither racially, historically, culturally nor linguistically have any affinity…It is only by historical accident and as a natural administrative convenience that they have been tacked on to an Indian province" (19). The colonial period of the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis is defined by an

occupation of their indigenous ancestral homelands by British India and the impending departure of the British from India was witness to the aspirations and hopes of the people for leading a life no longer defined by foreign or outside occupation. The denial to their aspirations contributed to regionalist agitations, indigenous rights movements, other forms of resistance and eventually armed struggles against the nascent Indian state. Sardar Vallabhai Patel, the first home minister of independent India recognized the salient point of difference. This recognition of difference was to contribute to the self and other dichotomy in the relationship between the Indian state and the region.

> All along the Himalayas in the north and north-east, we have on our side of the frontier a population ethnically and culturally not different form the Tibetans and Mongloids. The undefined state of the frontier and the existence on our side a population with its affinities to the Tibetans and Chinese have all the elements of potential trouble….(Saikia and Baishya 7)

Sanjoy Hazarika alludes that affinity and identity are critical towards factors that determine the way North-east communities of Mongoloid origins understand themselves as being different and separate from the rest of the Indian mainstream.

> Affinity and Identity. These, more than any other factors, represented the principal compulsions that triggered the Naga, Mizo, Meitei, Tripuri and Assamese affirmation of separateness from the non-Mongolian communities that dominate the Indian subcontinent. (159)

Easterine Kire is a Naga writer who has been inspired by postcolonial African authors known for their passion of writing about native culture and society. She emphasises on the presence of an enormous body of "unwritten history" (Kire, "FAQ") of the Nagas which needs documentation. Kire reveals that she primarily authors literary works to create what she refers to as "our own literature" (Kire, "FAQ"). Some of the other works Kire is credited for are *Khelhoukevira* (1982), *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) among other works.

Malsawmi Jacob is a Mizo writer who came into contact with the oft repeated "an island of peace" (Sarangi 3) description which glosses over the people stories of the troubled past. Consequently, she took on the venture of writing her first novel in English about this specific history of the Mizos which is the historical period of the Mizo struggle for independence that led to the Peace Accord of 1986. It is a significant

part of Mizo history because it has buried under it conditions quite similar to what Kire refers to as "unwritten history" and "our own literature." Jacob's other list of works include *Tinkim Dâwn* (2003), *The Messiah* (2012), *Blind Spots* (2019) and *Zo zêm* (2022).

Robin S. Ngangom is a Manipuri Meitei poet. Ngangom admits to have written sugary sentimental works of verse during his school days. However, his deep search for a legitimate voice has lead him to engaging with belief in a poetry of feeling as opposed to mere cerebral poetry. Ngangom's passionately inspired poetry can be described as a poetry of political and social critique that is predominantly anchored in the history, people and landscape of the Meiteis of Manipur. Some of his other works include *Khasia in Gwalia* (1995), *Where the Sun Rises When Shadow Falls: The Northeast* (2009), *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009) and *My Invented Land* (2023).

Assaduddin highlights that the literary works representative of the North-east define the literature of the region in opposition to the literature that is perceived as mainland Indian literature (1). The select works are a result reflective of specific, local and particularized concerns not in conformity with the larger Indian literary traditions as such cast outside its definitions. Kailash C. Baral defines the conditions under which writers from the region engage with concepts characterized by indigenous literary sensibilities.

> Emerging out of the colonial – ethnographic representation and seeking consolidation of ethnic and cultural identities in postcolonial time, the writers from the Northeast India in their works describe themselves and their cultures, express their views and ideas, feelings and emotions, thereby signifying their cultural and ethnic particularity. (5)

Chapter II: Towards a Poetics of Difference

Chapter two analyzes the theoretical frameworks which endorse systematic, centralized and structured approaches through an exploration of alternative theoretical perspectives. "Too little understood by the rest of the country, this region has largely remained 'imagined'" (Veio Pou 76). It establishes the salience of the poetics of difference in the provision of a theoretical basis and tone for the study as a whole. The effort on part of the Indian state to homogenize the region under norms that privilege and promote a monocultural integrationist narrative – a narrative which endeavors to uphold the structures that support a highly essentialist idea of Indianness.

There is a poetics of difference at work which is not afforded the respect and dignity that differences and distinctiveness linked to indigenous voices from the region deserve. Often found embedded within this poetics of difference is one that is associated with the Mongoloid phenotype of the people groups of the North-east where racism results in discrimination towards people groups of the region. The Naga, Mizos and Manipuris being relegated to positions of subalternity and marginalization, Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom express a deeply felt need to articulate the realities and lived-experiences of the people while resisting the uniformity with which the region is approached. To this effect, difference including theoretical considerations ranging from poststructuralism, postcolonialism to postmodernism are explored to provide a foundational basis for a critical enquiry that evolves out of the differences between the center and the region. One of the seminal texts that makes provisions for the articulation of representational voices from positions of marginality is "Can the Subalterns Speak?" (1983) by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak. The select works represent the nature of the experiences that Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris have had to undergo. Post India's independence, its nation-building projects assumed that the North-east must naturally conform to a shared postcolonial consciousness with the rest of mainstream Indian society. However, the postcolonial consciousness of the North-east was different and continues to depict a difference and uniqueness among the hill states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. This rather uninformed assumption that what constitutes the idea of the Indian nation may be applied to the region without taking into account the sensitivity of the unique social, cultural and historical conditions that define the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri identity often leads to persistent conflicts. To this effect, the contributions of James C. Scott, Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, Anthony D. Smith and Margaret Moore have played a significant role. The chapter also looks at the "doctrine of discovery" based on the idea that a territory belongs to the nation whose nationals discovered it – logic of discovery which treated tribal or indigenous land as "empty land." (Miller et al. 24) This is a critical source of conflict because by this logic the indigenous lands of the North-east have been overrun by non-tribals, from other parts of the country, accounting for the fear of the migrant outsider who threatens to minoritize Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis in their own ancestral homelands. The essentialist, positivist and foundationalist idea of India vis-à-vis the Naga, Mizo or Meitei essentialist, positivist and foundationalist stances make conditions rife for

conflict in the region – leading to indigenous rights struggles, regionalist agitations and armed oppositions against the Indian state and the consequent military operations by the Indian army. In attempting to voice the angst, distress and suffering of the people of the region resulting from the conflicts Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's significant contributions to the field of biopolitics is explored against the provisions of the select texts. Critical to Agamben's contribution is an understanding of the creation of a state of exception in the North-east where Indian citizens are placed under conditions conspicuous for the absence of the rule of law. A "state of exception" may be created by the idea that it is for the general well-being of the people, "…suspension of law may be necessary for the common good…" (26). The question then is whether or not the North-east is included in the notion of "common good"? Moreover, Edmund Husserl's theoretical concept of the essence of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei conflict has been incorporated to understand the people of the region through their first-person-lived experiences. Furthermore, this research initiative has also established that there is an impasse between the essentialisms of mainstream Indian society vis-à-vis North-east communities of India. The nation-building priorities of the Indian state assigns the essentialism of the region with identity politics as narrow, insular and parochial as such the fear of balkanization of the nation as a whole. These aforementioned priorities of the broader Indian nation consequently treats assimilation as desirable for cultural minorities like the Naga, Mizo and Meitei who need to be fully integrated to the idea of India. Furthermore, the study explores the question of experiences being rendered epistemically suspect because they are unquestionably subjective as defined by postmodernist theoretical provisions. This becomes problematic because the select primary works are strictly derived out of experiences based on "people stories" (Daftuar "For Easterine), "real people" (Sarangi 3) and the "poetry of witness" (Ngangom, "Contemporary Manipuri" 300) forms of literary expressions. As such, the postpositivist realist perspectives of Satya P. Mohanty and Paula M.L. Moya are explored alongside the provisions of the select works to render the literary accounts based on experiences as grounded in postpositivist notions of reality and consequently an objective source of knowledge.

Chapter III: Exterior's Gaze and Interior's Self Recognition

Chapter three predominantly deconstructs and delves into the external factors that shape the perception and representation of the North-east through specific epistemological lenses. The postcolonial Indian state's exterior gaze is performed from

a position of superiority dehumanizing the people groups from the North-east in the process. It is reminiscent of the colonial experience of the oppressive nature by which the British interacted with the natives of India. "The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's views of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of 'civilized' knowledge" (Smith 72). Malhotra explains that integral elements of racial, linguistic and cultural differences associated with the "Indian" way of life were isolated and placed in the West's own conceptual categories. Categories that privileged the Western gaze and declares itself as the norm to be emulated by the lesser and inferior peoples of India.

> Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (Smith 63)

In the North-east the privileging of the mainstream Indian way of life establishes itself as the norm for the untamed and primordial Naga, Mizo or Manipuri to conform to. Spivak asserts that there are positions of marginality, differentiated by specific and unique contexts, which makes representation an undeniable critical prerequisite, "…the 'true subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation" (40).

Easterine Kire asserts that people groups in the North-east go through many "definitions" which "label us" and how such labels become "constructed identities" or stereotypes about the people of the region (Kire, "Writing from" 11). She stresses upon the need to "write outside the box" (Kire, "Writing from" 12) as one has to break the constructs about the self and recognize one's own truths. As such, there is dire need for authentic efforts to unveil the stereotypes of the North-east that is projected as a land where violence is a basic trait of the people of the region. On many occasions the efforts and endeavors on part of the people groups from North-east India to defend and safeguard one's identity, i.e., the Naga, Mizo or Manipuri identity, is misrepresented as rebellions against the Indian nation. The North-east's indigenous voices are very often treated with prejudice as "…all voices of protest including genuine articulations of the region had been designated as 'law and order' problems" (Ngaihte 14). In *Bitter Wormwood* Mose's grandmother's generation is vocal about the state of affairs that

enveloped their lives during the initial days of India's independence as she comments, "We have never been a part of India before. Why should we join them now?" (18) In *Zorami* the Mizos reminiscence a free and independent life of the past in the speech of Laldenga, "From time immemorial, our ancestors lived in total independence without any foreign interference" (60). Here, Scott's *Zomia* which stirs the imagination of the North-east is reminiscent of a "stateless" (31) or "nonstate" (30) space where the people lived under self-rule devoid of external influences is evoked. In *Life on Hold* the Indian army is perceived to be an occupying force in the region and it was regarded a noble cause to resist the occupation, "The old soldiers had urged one another onward with the reminder that they were fighting for their homeland…" (21). Notions around the protection of the ancestral homelands from outsiders is believed to be for a good and honorable cause – the protection of the Naga way of life. In *Bitter Wormwood* Nehru, on realizing the Naga's want independence he shouts vehemently, "…Whether heaven falls or India goes to pieces and blood runs red in the country, I don't care Nagas will not be allowed to become independent" (62). Tilottoma Misra highlights that this a stance that is in complete opposition to Nehru's statement about the people of the North-east during the early years of independence "…people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them" (219). Nari Rustomji "…provides perhaps the most perceptive account of the paradox of a Mahatma Gandhi-inspired nationalist government resorting to heavy military means to suppress the tiny Naga resistance at appalling human cost to ordinary Nagas" (Subramanian 17). In *Bitter Wormwood*, "The new security forces were rough and spoke Hindi. They were armed and carried weapons" (56). In *Zorami* the formidable use of the mighty Indian air force against what India called its own citizens sends a rather deafening message. It bombed the town of Aizawl as though it was at war with a foreign country. "It's burning, houses are burning!...They're dropping bombs! They all watched in horror" (87). Robin S. Ngangom's "I am Sorry to See Poetry in Chains" from his anthology *Words and the Silence* draws up an image of being under external control. The poet finds himself under shackles unable to determine the course of his own life which is representative of the Manipuri lives. He refers to the loss of traditional values and fragmentation of homes and laments that Kangleipak is now under chains, no longer the "Once prime land, beneficent and fabled" (line 37). Moreover, the poet is referring to a situation where there is an external or outside force that grips their fabled land where the

language of poetry is no longer free flowing. Ngangom's poem "A Country" from *Words and the Silence* alludes to "the stranglehold of a country/that lives only in the mind" (lines 31-32). It presents a condition where the people are being forcefully held by the neck, unable to breathe, because their land is overrun and occupied. As such the images evoke an occupation of Manipur by external forces and elements. In "From 'The Book of Grievances'" from *Time's Crossroads* the poet Ngangom refers to a condition that is not just the military occupation of Manipur but a migration of outside population into the region. "Today as East meets West in the hills/our blind arterial roots grope/under the earth" (bk.2, lines 53-55).

The indigenous rights struggles and regionalist agitations in the Naga hills, Mizo hills and Imphal valley were labelled by the Indian state as moves by disgruntled and disloyal subjects to break away in secession from India. The Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis have all been placed under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958 by the Indian state to counter a number of armed struggles and regionalist agitations. To borrow from Agamben the entire civilian Naga, Mizo or Meitei population could be placed under a state of exception which in effect removed the rule of law from the region. In *Bitter Wormwood* Mose and other Naga civilians from his village were forced to effectively live under conditions where they could be shot dead by the army at will. However, under AFSPA the soldier would have the protection and immunity from being tried by a court of law. In Mose's village, an Indian soldier shoots dead a young man who was on his way home, late at night, leading to an enormous protest by villagers against the killing. "There was nothing forthcoming from the state government nor was anything expected" (169).

> Security forces often resort to high-handed action to establish dominance over militant groups during searches, operations and ambushes. Frequent failures to take action against misuse of powers by security forces do tend to tarnish the image of these forces. (Subramanian 56)

Also in *Zorami*, the experiences of the common people is such that they could be picked up by army men at any time and their fate was unknown. The Indian army had vented out their anger at the villagers of Darman village because they failed to catch hold of underground members of the MNF. "They arrested nine persons at random, one of them a woman school teacher. She was never seen again after her arrest" (103). In the Manipuri scenario, the Malom massacre by the Assam Rifles on

2nd November 2000 led to the commencement of an indefinite fast of Ms Irom Sharmila to fight for the removal of AFSPA from the state. Sharmila fasted for sixteen long years and has been admired for her strength and courage in the undertaking of the longest satyagraha a nonviolent approach towards the achievement of her social and political goals of AFSPA free Manipur. The other major headliner surrounding the notorious AFSPA is the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama in 2004. This was a blatant example of human rights violation attracting major news headlines in the state of Manipur. On 15th July 2004 a protest was a held by a group of women at the gates of the Kangla, which was the headquarters of Assam Rifle, where the women stripped themselves naked in protest of the rape and murder of Manorama. Ngangom specifically refers to this Kangla Protest of 2004 where they held a banner that read, "Indian Army, Rape us too, We are all Manorama Mothers." In his poem "Everywhere I Go…" from the anthology *The Desire of Roots* (2019), the poet expresses the long wait for justice in Manorama's murder.

> And I want to tell my poet-friend
> Of the twelve mothers who stripped themselves
> and asked soldiers to rape them.
> In fact, I make imaginary journeys
> to its little world every day
> and wait for the fog of justice to lift. (lines 16-21)

The stereotypes and presuppositions about the North-east and the security-related template by which the region is externally gazed upon stands questioned through the self's interior recognition. The nascent Indian postcolonial nation's efforts to aggressively integrate the region with the rest of India had generated genuine fears in the North-east. Bijukumar highlights a very critical point which stresses on "…the assertion of ethnic identity and the accompanying extremist tendencies are related to the feeling of losing one's own identity, marginalization and exploitation by others" (29).

Chapter IV: Breaking the Impasse

Chapter four of the study reinforces the undeniable presence of the impasse between the mainstream Indian identity vis-à-vis the North-east identities of the Nagas, Mizos and Manipuris. In the poem "The Ignominy of Geometry" from *The Desire of Roots* presents this dichotomy between the mainstream Indian society and the region. Ngangom stresses on how "The ignominy of geometry/the inability to see

beyond centers and triangles" (lines 27-28) contributes to a certain kind of blindness to alternate ways of seeing the world. It would be apt to direct one's attention to Lyotard's concept of the *différend* which is an irresolvable dispute where consensus is elusive. In fact Macey goes on to say that "A *différend* cannot be resolved; at best, a partial resolution can be negotiated" (237). The theoretical concepts of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl prove to be critical in the process of identifying the essence of the conflict between the Indian state and the North-east. Husserl's contributions to the field of phenomenology is considered to be an outgrowth of Kant's concept of *noumena* which means *things in themselves* and *phenomena* which are *things as they appear to the mind*. Husserl stresses on the "natural attitude" (Zahvi 51) and how one's perception of seeing the world is grounded in it. He discusses that questioning the existing order, "…involves a change of attitude; we must look at the world with "new eyes" (Schmitt 238-39). In effect it is questioning of stereotypes and presuppositions that affect the way an object or event is perceived or one's established way of interpreting one's experience. Husserl directs one's attention to "the critique of knowledge" with the end objective of locating "…absolutely bare, presuppositionless data on which to build the whole knowledge; more precisely, the problem is to intuit the essence of knowledge…" (Husserl *The Idea* xv) Mose and other children in *Bitter Wormwood* are just going about their day-to-day routine lives, "Mose liked school and was a quick learner which pleased his teachers a lot. This boy will go far…" (24). However, things take an ominous turn when Mose's grandmother is killed by an Indian soldier's bullet while she out working in the fields. An identity consciousness, to protect one's way of life and land, gets created in even school going children when they are forced by circumstances to witness brutal deaths of innocent near and dear ones. There are instances during the military operations when no distinction between the common civilian populations and the armed rebel groups is made by the Indian army leading to unfavorable consequences. In *Zorami* one such account is presented, "But they dropped the bombs on the town. They do not consider whether people are innocent or not. Even young children and babies are not spared. An uncomfortable silence. (92) Moreover, in *Bitter Wormwood* Mose and Neituo his close friend discuss the state of affairs in Nagaland absolutely disappointed by the new developments. They had been a part of the Naga fight for independence who were clear about the original cause. Neituo expresses despairingly, "When you begin to kill each other, you no longer have a cause left, do you? You have as good as destroyed your own cause"

(148). In the process innocent civilians who were not directly a part of the factional conflicts became victims as well. “His widowed mother heard that her son had been shot and she ran out of her house in a mad frenzy” (157). Mose’s small shop is not spared either from the new generation of extortionists. “Money, it’s always money, and not small amounts either. They demand three, five, ten thousands. I barely sell that in a month” (161). These extortionists claim that the funds collected is to support the cause of fighting for the Naga cause, however, it becomes difficult to ascertain who is authentic or otherwise. “In addition to the bogus members, there were many jobless young men joining the factions and extorting money” (163). In *Life on Hold* the conditions presented are not dissimilar, in fact, the entire plot of the novella unfolds in this climate of distrust and fear created by factions, factional killings and extortions. Here, the Naga cause is represented by the character of Roko who holds on deeply to the belief that the struggle is not in vain. However, all around him there is a breaking down of the order of life as Nagas had begun to kill Nagas, “…they were quickly establishing a reign of fear through the brutal killings of fellow Nagas who opposed them.” (19-20) In *Zorami* the ill-fated *mautam* famine and the negligence depicted by the Indian state towards the famine-stricken populace has often been identified as the cause for indigenous movements and regionalist agitations of the Mizos. However, once the conflict between the Mizos and the Indian state begins, the violence that unfolds also produces characters like Ralkapa who betray the original cause after having been captured and tortured by the Indian army’s operations. “He had to inform on more and more men and women to the stop the torture, if only for a while. When he ran out of people to report against, he resorted to accusing innocent ones also” (99). Ralkapa and his kind created a climate of distrust and fear where even innocent civilians were being picked up by army men. On the other hand, Lalawmpuia amidst the atmosphere of violence and counter violence that defined the Mizo landscape attempt to make sense of what the freedom struggle was turning into, “But we’re falling into worse and worse bondage! More and more bloodshed. Mizos killing Mizos. Young patriots ordered to murder one’s friends and relatives” (133). When he realized that the freedom struggle was reduced to Mizos killing Mizos he refused to continue be a part of the movement.

In the poems of Robin S. Ngangom the sense of despair, distrust and suspicion that evolves out of the regionalist agitations of the Meiteis is aptly projected. Ngangom talks about how the land and people of Manipur are frequently traded off

for personal and selfish gains, in effect, suggesting the people's betrayal of the original cause. A scenario which is not dissimilar to both the Naga and Mizo conditions where Meiteis are pitted against other Meiteis to point of killing the other. In the poem "Now Words Should Catch Fire…" from the anthology *Words and the Silence* the poet paints a picture about lives of betrayals, "Weary of the culture of inhumanity,/tired of a tradition of shamelessness,/will we join blood-moneyed hands?/Will we wear a crown of rupees/and blind our souls?" (lines 7-11). In "From The Book of Grievances" from *Time's Crossroads* the poet seemingly addresses the question of how Meiteis have betrayed other Meiteis. "We become our own perpetrator/victims of our own dark deeds" (bk.2, lines 56-57). According to Husserl, understanding the essence of the object of enquiry is absolutely essential. The natural attitude is inclined towards defining the Naga, Mizo or Meitei conflicts through stereotypes and presuppositions that characterize the conflict from externally constructed perspectives about the region. Towards this effort, the many complex layers of violence that has resulted from the conflict between the North-east vis-à-vis the center needs a close and careful examination. In the process, there is a need to suspend and bracket all forms of violence, atrocities, betrayals, vendettas and extortions that have marred the notion of what it was all about in the first place – protection of the indigenous way of life. Smith further draws one's attention to the need for "…reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground" (79).

However, an invocation of the essentialist Naga, Mizo or Meitei identity of the North-east becomes somewhat problematic as the nation-building efforts of the Indian state is burdened with its own priorities for the general well-being of the entire nation. It strives to find some threads of commonalities between its diverse and distinct components. However, this homogenizing effort is treated with suspect by minority cultures who fear the loss of one's particular way of life. In fact efforts towards nation-building are perceived to be characterized by a homogenizing notion of the mainstream Indian essentialism which creates an impasse. The Indian state sees the essentialism of the region as problematic as the focus on Naga, Mizo or Meitei experiences promote what the center defines as identity politics. An identity politics characterized by narrow, parochial and selfish interests of regional and localized nature that loses touch with the larger pan-Indian identity.

Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom attempt to provide representational literary accounts of the Naga, Mizo and Meitei lived experiences as

the truth of their respective communities. However, the postmodernist definition of objective knowledge determines that it cannot be dependent on theoretical presuppositions, as such, theory dependence of experiences is the affirmation that it will always be epistemically suspect. The postpositivist realist theory put forward by Satya P. Mohanty, on the other hand, makes provision for subjective lived-experiences as a source of objective knowledge. Paula M.L. Moya highlights that, "Experiences are not wholly external events; they do not just happen. Experiences happen to us, and it is our theoretically mediated interpretation of an event that makes it an 'experience.'" (81) It is important to recognize here that "…while human's understanding of their world may provide access to 'reality,' their conceptual or linguistic constructions of the world do not constitute the totality of what can be considered real" (27). As such, postpositivist realism avoids essentialist, positivist and foundationalist attempt to engage with knowledge that guarantees absolute certainty and rejects postmodernism's extreme skepticism towards the reliability of theoretically mediated interpretations of socially constructed knowledge. There are three postpositivist realist premises that have been taken into consideration for the present study. The first is that different social categories such as race and culture which make up an individual's social location (Moya, *Learning from* 39) are causally related to the experiences that an individual will have. The second, postpositivist realist premise is that it is characterized by a cognitive component (Moya "Postmodernism, "Realism" 81) to the understanding of identity which creates a space for error and accuracy in the interpretation of one's experiences therefore enabling the revision of one's understanding of a given situation. The third, is the premise that oppositional struggle is fundamental to building one's capacity to understand the world more accurately. Alternative constructions and accounts generated through the process of oppositional struggle open up new ways of looking as one's world that often complicate and challenge dominant conceptions of what is "right", "true" and "beautiful" (Moya, *Learning from* 44).

The select literary articulations reflect a strong affiliation to a sense of place which foregrounds their lived-experiences based on a poetics of difference embedded in their social location vis-à-vis the mainstream of Indian society. As such there is an authentic need for representational efforts that reflect the reality of the lived-experiences of the people from marginalized spaces of the Nagas, Mizos and Meitei. A deep awareness and realization that their cultural identity is constructed through

certain narratives of differences and losing such narratives will eventually lead to the loss of their cultural identity. The poetics of difference effectively plays out here as the social categories of race and culture deeply influence the nature of the experiences that the Nagas, Mizos and Meiteis have had to undergo. The struggles for freedom from the Indian state in each of the respective cases has been established by the fact that there is a deep need to protect one's indigenous way of life. This xenophobic fear is grounded on the reality of a stark difference between the region and the Indian state. Chakraborty reifies the point of difference that, "…the people of Northeast India, especially the tribal people, differ from the plains people of India in respect of culture, customary behavior, faith and race" (6). In *Bitter Wormwood* the external mainstream Indian gaze of Rakesh in responding to the discrimination faced by North-easterners in Delhi blurts out to Neibou, Mose's grandson, "But Neibou, you are not really Indian! I mean it is so clear to me that you are not" (208). Later in the novel, Rakesh's visit to Nagaland makes him admit to himself that, "…to be in Naga towns and villages seemed like being in another country altogether" (220). In *Four Gardens and Other Poems*, one finds among the many themes, the origins, identity and indigeneity of the Mizos which stress on racial differences from mainstream India. Jacob is compelled to say you "give me such strange looks/like I don't belong to the same earth" (lines 26-27). This difference of race undeniably influences the experience of discrimination and exclusion from the definitions of Indianness. The difference embedded in the racial constitution of the people groups indigenous to the region as being the fundamental grounds for discrimination; i.e, the Mongoloid racial features which is normatively looked upon as being foreign to the idea of India. Sitlhou and Punathil make a strong emphasis on racism faced by North-easterners in Delhi, where discourse on identity of an Indian is often prescribed and normatively fixed leading to the exclusion of the Mongoloid face from "…the construct of 'what an Indian ought to look like'…" (115).

There is a cognitive component built into the mediated form of knowledge about the world. This cognitive component associated with identity allows for error and accuracy in interpreting one's experiences making it possible for revision of one's perception about a given situation or condition. The British missionaries' proselytization of the Nagas and Mizos and the high percentage of Christians among the two communities is often treated with suspect. Once the British departed from India they had left behind a strong culture of the Christian faith among the Nagas and

the Mizos which contributes to a poetics of difference in the relationship with mainstream Indian society. Almost the entire populations of the Nagas and Mizos conform to the Christian faith and as such there are mainstream Indian claims of the Christianity as being a source of conflict in the North-east. Chakraborty highlights that "…Christianity is considered to be an essential marker of tribal 'identity' and sole reason for the secessionist and anti-nationalist overtones in the region" (8). "This also resulted in deeply held perceptions in mainland India that Naga 'separatism' is encouraged and abetted by the church and church organizations" (Baishya 93). Contrary to the above accounts, in Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* the church ministers were the active voices pushing for a peaceful solution to the conflict during the Mizo armed struggle for independence between the Indian state vis-à-vis the MNF. The Christian faith's ideological basis promotes a message of God's love for all no matter what race. Chaplain Rinzuala preached, "…a new message of God's love for all people" (158). The British missionaries and their proselytization of the Mizos is endearingly recollected and despite the Mizos being an entirely different race the missionaries still spread the good news of Jesus Christ's love and salvation to the Mizos. The principles of Christianity that governed the thoughts of the erstwhile church leaders and the Mizo populace, as such was critical, in paving the way for the Peace Accord of 1986 between the Mizos and the Indian state.

Oppositional struggles provide an understanding and an appreciation of the world through alternative experiences and accounts. It complicates and challenges the dominant notions of what is right, true and beautiful. There are often questions posed about the political nature of the literature from the North-east. K.B. Veio Pou highlights that, "…literature from the region is categorized as different from the rest of the country in as much as any products of the society" (77). Robin S. Ngangom discusses in the article "Contemporary Manipuri Poetry – An Overview" how difficult it is to write poetry of romantic nature under the circumstances where there are "guns pressed to both temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (299). In the poem, "Writer" from the *The Desire of Roots* Ngangom discusses how a writer can manage without the incentives of life, however, being unable to express one's freedom is disorienting experience. The writer hates himself because he has to "mouth/the ugly things and even his/bold words would seem prudish/in free worlds" (lines 22-25). But the writer is compelled by the reality of his socio-political location to represent the concerns which may appear to be distasteful to people who have only experienced a

life of "free worlds" (line 25). Ngangom alludes that if the reality was different the writer's disposition would have the freedom to pursue, "the more beautiful words/skies, dances, images, discourse,/trees, nudes, illumination,/if he possessed the gift/of being free" (lines 31-35). Ngangom provides an understanding of the world which is different and that differences do not necessarily mean they are wrong because they do not conform to another's notions of what is right and beautiful. It is the freedom of being able to be different as an indigenous Naga, Mizo or Meitei yet not being discriminated and excluded from the definitions of Indianness. In other words, the need to be respected and dignified as a Naga, Mizo or Meitei despite racial, social and cultural differences from the Indian grand narrative.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This study provides an understanding of how the poetics of difference unfolds between the mainstream Indian society vis-à-vis the Naga, Mizo and Meitei societies. Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob and Robin S. Ngangom's representational works engage with stark differences and distinctiveness between the self and the other to help broaden one's perspectives. The self's interior recognition of the above writers unveiled through these literary representations is, not only a question of speaking out as Spivak suggests, but also, greatly dependent on Maggio's emphasis on the need to be heard. What is being articulated needs to be appreciated but that can only be possible if disparate forms of lived-experiences are accepted as a reality that affects both the self and the other. Debbarma here draws one's attention to how "…our refusal to tolerate other's acts, which we consider offensive, forecloses, in advance, the possibility for a mutual relationship and coexistence" (28).

> [L]iterary reading is a setting-to-work for an interrogation and deconstruction of images of self in the encounter with radical alterity, and a mode to imaginatively train oneself to detect the trace of the other." (Baishya 23)

Stuart Hall makes emphasis on the significance of differences in the constitution of one's identity, "Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside difference." Furthermore, it is critical to note that Dominick La Capra stresses on how identity politics should not "…be conflated with identification in the sense of total fusion with others wherein difference is obliterated and criticism is tantamount to betrayal" (43).

An extract from the preface of the book *Politics of Identity and Nation Building in Northeast India* (1997) refers to A.K. Baruah's article "Do we need to build a nation?" where he is quoted to have said,

> …calling the Indian nation a melting pot means subsuming other cultures, who inspite of accepting the reality and advantages of the state of India, are not prepared to accept the hegemonic Indian nationalism. What is therefore, needed is a process of state building rather than nation-building. (Phukon and Dutta viii)

Moore talks about conditions where there is a strong identification of the majority national group with "…a particular 'thick' culture or religion, and seeks to create unity by extending that cultural expression across the country" (99). Nationalist tendencies that aggressively seek to build an identity without accommodating the sentiments of minority cultures creates the fear of assimilation. Apparently, such aggressive move towards minority groups has the possibility of engendering the need for self-determination, self-governance and even secession to protect one's identity and way of life. Moore explores this sensitive space and suggests that there is a "need for a thin, political identity," (100) where one's regional identity is not seen as an impediment towards the expression of one's national identity. In effect, there is a need to broaden the concept of what constitutes the idea of being an Indian. The creation of conditions where regional and localized identities are not discriminated, excluded, abnormalized and marginalized from the notions of Indianness. One should be capable of being Bengali, Assamese, Punjabi, Oriya, Naga, Mizo or Meitei and an Indian at the same time.

B.P. Singh in his article "North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis" (1997) alludes to what the "Father of the Nation," Mahatma Gandhi, had once written as a prerequisite to keep the great nation of India together.

> India's prayer should not be 'God, give him the light that thou hast given me' but, rather 'Give him all the light and truth he needs for his highest development.' This readiness to concede to a fellow citizen the right follow his own light became the foundation of both secularism and national unity. (263)

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