

**COUNTER-VOICES IN SELECTED POEMS FROM  
NORTH-EAST INDIA**

**BY**

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**Submitted**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of  
Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**

## **DECLARATION**

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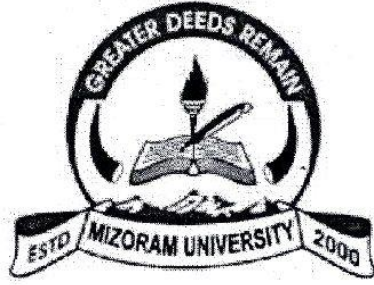
**I, Lalsangliani Ralte, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the result of the work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form the basis for the award of any degree to me or to anybody else to the best of my knowledge, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University or Institute.**

**This is being submitted to Mizoram University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.**

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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that “Counter-voices in Selected Poems from North-east India” written by Lalsangliani Ralte has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil. regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Postcolonial theory, counter discourse is an important tool of resistance through which writers counter existing colonial discourse. The word “counter” means to “to reply to somebody by trying to prove that what they said is not true” according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Hornby 348). Counter-voices in the context of this research, would then suggest the expressions or opinions of writers who have responded to and contradicted or opposed oppressive ideology which perceives and represents them in a manner that is not wholly acceptable to the represented people. Such counter-voices may also reflect dissatisfaction and concern over the treatment that has been meted out on a marginalized people or community by a more powerful authority at some point in their history.

To expand further on the use and meaning of countering or resisting, it is a given that there will always be two sides, or a binary, wherein either of the two, or one of the two is resistant and in conflict with the other. This dissertation takes cognizance of the fact that counter-voices can and do exist even within the marginalized frameworks themselves. Instances of this can be between dominant groups within the same culture vying for power and status, and this can be witnessed particularly in the geo-political arena. The key chapters that deal with counter-voices found on institutionalized religion, identity and women deal with selected parameters which are dependent on the existent poems. Mizo poets writing in English with published works are negligible in number in comparison with other sister states. This dissertation has chosen to focus more on the cultural and historical binary and encounters thereof with the world outside and their communities and known world that has impacted and changed their worldview. Such outside forces dealt with are in the arena of religion, identity and women. Poems worked upon in this dissertation are chosen primarily for their relevance to the parameters dealt with, and

poems have not been chosen from Assam, Sikkim and Tripura as the counter-voices they present are different in nature and not wholly in compliance with the direction this dissertation attempts to take.

Poets from North-east India have raised their voices to counter the various forms of authority they have been subjected to. In Introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essay* (2011), Tilottoma Misra writes with regards to Assam that “the main waves of cultural invasion that have wrought significant changes in the literary world of the region originated in the Bhakti Movement, followed by the various reformist dispensations of the nineteenth century, colonialism and the Christian missionary activities that accompanied it, and the new culture of development that has become a part of global culture” (xiii). The history of such “cultural invasion” is more or less shared by the other communities of the North-east region. The contact with these cultures has further marginalized the indigenous people because more often than not, the alien cultures prove to be more dominant and influential.

The colonizers, who were the British in the case of North-east India during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, saw themselves as civilized people on whom lay the self-imposed burden of propagating Christianity and western civilization. They arrived in this region in the nineteenth century as colonizers and generally perceived the indigenous communities of the region as “pagans or barbarians” (Talukdar 28). The Brahmaputra valley of Assam became a part of British India in the year 1826 and the other neighboring regions also came to be annexed gradually. The north-eastern region is connected to mainland India by a small corridor, and shares its international border of more than 4,500 kilometers with countries like Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China. Its emergence in colonial discourse is as a frontier region and initially connoted “the long swathe of mountains, jungles and riverine, tropical marshy flatlands

located between the eastern limits of British ruled Bengal and the western borders of the kingdom of Ava (Burma)” (Bhaumik 4). Manjeet Baruah also states that North-east as a frontier region is a “colonial invention” which did not exist prior to the nineteenth century. He also writes that a distinctive problem faced by the British government was “how to naturalize a non-natural frontier” (29). In post-independence period, North-east has come to be an accepted terminology which now currently consists of the group of eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. These states cover a total area of approximately 262,230 sq. km. which is about 7.7 % of the Indian territory and, according to Census of India 2011, a population of 45,587,982 persons which is roughly 3.74 % of India’s population. Three states of the region - Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya contain an overwhelming majority of Christians (87.93 %, 87.16 % and 74.59 % respectively) according to the aforementioned census. The region is characterized by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. Pushpita Das and Namrata Goswami write of North-east India in the Preface to *India’s North East: New Vistas for Peace* (2008):

Endowed with a rich variety of tribal customs, folklore and lifestyle, North East India displays an overarching influence of modernity in terms of dress, fashion, habits, and education. Exclusionary tribal identities, however, remain strong. With more than 200 tribes and sub-tribes contending for assertion of identity, there has been a spread of multi-dimensional insurgencies with strong ideological, social, and political linkages as well as an external spillover. (6)

North-east India is a sensitive and important region. No other part of India has boundaries which are as vulnerable to foreign powers as this region. Though the writers of North-east India have their individual concerns and manners of expressing them, Kailash C. Baral writes in his



essay “Articulating Marginality” that they “collectively represent what could be called the ethos of the region” because of their “shared history and political destiny” (5). Subir Bhaumik also states that North-east is “a region rooted more in the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition” (1). It is acknowledged that there is “hardly anything common about the people of Northeast, for they are as diverse as its landscape” (Baral, *Earth Songs* x). However, it is also admitted that “these communities are known for their personal warmth, indulgent hospitality and the culture of ‘giving’ that characterize their commonness in the face of differences” (ibid x).

Birendranath Datta divides the population of North-east India into three categories from the cultural point of view in his essay “North-East India and its Socio-Cultural Milieu”:

1. Those tribal communities living in the rather distant hills, more or less isolated and free from the impact of ‘Sanskritic’ or other ‘organized’ cultures (except in the case of tribes with Buddhistic connections).

2. Those tribal groups, both in the hills and the plains, who have retained their tribal group identity but who have been acculturated in various degrees as a result of living in close proximity or contact with the ‘non-tribal’ Sanskritized majority, or through the impact of Buddhism or Christianity or Islam.

3. Those societies which are more or less fully Sanskritized, where the population is wholly (as in the case of the Meiteis) or substantially (as in the case of the Assamese) made up of erstwhile Indo-Mongoloid stocks. Local Muslims of this region, although not Sanskritized from the religious point of view, are culturally a part of this milieu. (120)

Poets of North-east India deal with a wide array of topics. Their poems are by no means limited to ones that deal with colonialism and its aftermath. The poets of North-east India “collect the raw material from life’s fount, in that stories come into being in the unfolding of the world of words in order to give some meaning to life while connecting the individual to the society, to the world” (Baral, *Earth Songs* xi). A study of poems from this region shows how universal themes like romantic and platonic love, celebration of nature, exploration of legends and myths, globalization and the impact of advancements made in technology are also to be found. All poems from the region are not essentially resistant in nature; they are at times inclusive and liberal, and accepting of the oneness or unity of mankind. In her poem “Dot” Nini Lungalang ponders:

It makes me wonder;  
 if we claim to own  
 the land we live on  
 down to the centre of  
 the earth, which after all  
 is just a pinpoint dot –  
 who owns that dot?

In this poem, the poet suggests that man-made boundaries and divisions are insignificant when perceived from a different viewpoint. Sometimes, the counter-voices are also directed towards forces from within, and not always towards outsiders or external forces. For instance, in his poem “Play of the Absurd” Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih writes:

Old Powder Keg, Chief Minister of the hills

lackey of the plains, ordered a fox hunt.

A band of their rebels and strays students  
were immediately shot to shreds.

In this poem, Nongkynrih exposes the corrupt home-grown politicians who “fabricated clumsy, home-spun lies” for their own material advancements without any real consideration for their people. Nongkynrih also takes up the issue of corrupt leaders in another poem titled “Identification Marks” where he proclaims that the Syiems or Khasi traditional rulers “rule like commission agents/ and serve at the pleasure of scoundrels.”

However, for the purpose of the selected thrust of this dissertation, poems which may be read and analyzed as articulations of indignation at colonial constructs or inaccurate representations have been selected for detailed study. The selected poems for this research are as follows:

“For Sale” by Paul Lyngdoh from Meghalaya, a student turned politician. Lyngdoh laments over the “battered, autistic land with its lucre-laden earth” which is his homeland (171). He exposes in a satiric tone how his people no longer hold in high esteem the values that were so crucial to them before the advent of alien cultures. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Esther Syiem, all established poets and academicians from Meghalaya also reassert and celebrate their native culture and homeland through their selected poems which are as follows:

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih:

Identification Marks

Only Strange Flowers Have Come To Bloom

Rain Song 2000

Relations

Self-actualization

Winter Song

Desmond Kharmawphlang:

Letter from Pahambir

The Conquest

Esther Syiem:

Just One More Field My Child

The Hill of Woman's Death

Poets from Nagaland also offer a rich variety of themes through their poems. The selected poems are:

Temsula Ao:

Blood of Others

Musings During a Sermon

Stone People from Lungterok

Woman

Monalisa Changkija:

Seven untitled poems from *Weapons of Words on Pages of Pain* (2003).

The poems by Ao and Changkija will be studied to show how they have attempted to counter dominant ideologies that have been propagated by Western colonizers and by the patriarchal system within their own social fabric.

Robin S. Ngangom, a Manipuri poet settled in Meghalaya has also been selected for his portrayal of counter-voices detected in poems like:

Everywhere I Go

Poem for Joseph

To Alun Lewis, Soldier, Poet.

Ngangom explicitly writes “You being a Britisher/it is difficult to love you” (46).

The poems from Arunachal Pradesh have also been selected for their counter-voices on identity and for their celebration of traditional values. The selected poems are:

Yumlam Tana:           The *Kurta* and the *Pyjama*

Mamang Dai:           Birthplace

                              The Balm of Time

                              The Missing Link

These poems are unique in their attempts to resist dominant outside influences that threaten their identities. Two poems by Cherrie L. Chhangte from Mizoram have also been set for study for their portrayal of the voice of a woman from the hills. They are:

                              Plea

                              What Does an Indian Look Like

Pramod K. Nayar writes in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* that “anti-colonial struggles were about liberating themselves, at both individual and communal levels, from colonial attitudes and forms of thinking” (36). Tilottoma Misra also writes that a “sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literari of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era” (xviii). This is true of the selected poets as well. Their attempts at writing may be seen as a means to represent themselves and their communities to the world. They have taken to celebrating their indigenous culture through their poems in an effort to subvert the notion that the alien culture that had been imposed upon them is superior. This may

be seen as a means to liberate oneself from the clutches of the past. They have also attempted to depict the cultural loss that has been inflicted upon their communities. A number of the poets have also advocated a need for a recovery of such cultural losses. A brief look into the background of the poets may be necessary at this point to have a better understanding of their poetry and worldview.

The poems of Paul Lyngdoh (1972) are rich with irony and expressive of the shame he feels at the degeneration of values and morals of his land and people. His satiric poem “For sale” is an explicit exposition of how much has been lost by his people in terms of “pride, values, work culture” and also the “sense of shame” and “collective conscience”. His disappointment is apparent as he writes of the loss of principles among his people. He claims that his land is up for sale as are its beautiful women for wealthy “men from the lowlands, or even from across the seas.” He does not take care to disguise his belief that the women of his land have been enticed by wealth and are not bothered by the marital status, religion or caste of men as long as they are wealthy. His desire to re-establish the traditional values and customs of his land is apparent in his poems. His works include a bilingual collection of poetry called *Flood-gate/ Ka Khyrdop* (1991).

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (1964) is well-known as a poet, translator, and short story writer. He has published several books and research articles in both English and Khasi. These include *Moments* (1992), *The Sieve* (1992), *Ka Samoi jong ka Lyer* (1998), *Ki Mawsiang ka Sohra* (2002), *Ki Jingkynmaw* (2002) and *The Yearning of Seeds* (2011). He has also co-edited *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (2003) and *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from Northeast India* (2009) with Robin Ngangom. He is the recipient of the first North-East Poetry Award conferred by the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura. His poems

have been translated into Welsh, Swedish and several Indian languages. He too is from academia who teaches in the Department of English, NEHU, Shillong.

Many of Nongkynrih's poems, like those of Kharmawphlang's, deal with colonialism and its aftermath in Meghalaya. In his poem "Only Strange Flowers Have Come to Bloom", he expounds upon how "strangers and strange ways have come to bloom" in the land that belongs to his people. He writes with sorrow that his people are "living like wind-blown thistle" and that the "natives everywhere" have been supplanted by foreign "pears" since the arrival of David Scott. His poems are emotional, and yet politically engaged as they attempt to articulate the predicament of a tribe that has been influenced by forces that are instrumental in the dilution of their cultural identity.

Desmond Kharmawphlang (1964) from Shillong is a Professor at the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies in NEHU, Shillong. A bilingual writer and a renowned folklorist, he translates from Khasi to English and vice-versa. He has a number of published works to his credit which include *Touchstone* (1987), *Here* (1992), *Home Coming* (1996), *Ki Matti Byrshem* (2000), *Ka mer ka sadad: Conference, Confluence: the role of rivers and water in Khasi culture and vision* (2002) co-edited with Sujit Som, *Narratives of North-East India I & II* (2002), *Folklore in the Changing Times* (2003) co-edited with Jawaharlal Handoo and Sujit Som, *Attributes of Khasi Folklore* and *Khasi Folksongs and Tales* (2006). Besides these, he has also published a good number of scholarly articles in national and international journals.

Kharmawphlang's poems reflect his obsession with the folk and the stories they tell of his people. He writes of his land and his people and their belief systems with pride and with the intention to revive what can be revived. The desire for his roots has led him to explore the fascinating legends and folk traditions of his people. He is regarded as one of the most prominent

voices that speak on issues of identity and traditional folk practices. In his poem “Letter from Pahambir”, he describes the journey made by “city men” to “learn” more of their culture and beliefs from the village chief of Pahambir. He seems to ridicule the “church” and all that it represents in this poem as he talks of it as “glowing strangely in pallid arrogance”. He maintains the same disgruntled tone as he talks about the “conquest” of his hometown. In his poem titled “The Conquest” he admits that he never tires of talking about his hometown and describes its climatic conditions:

In summer the sky is pregnant,  
 Swollen with unborn rain.  
 Winter arrives, with a tepid sun  
 Touching the frozen hills, the dream-  
 Boats on lakes.

He goes on to talk about how his hometown has been subjected to “conquest” by the British as well as “those from the sweltering plains” and also people “from everywhere”. These poems can be viewed as expositions of an anguished heart yearning to revive an indigenous way of life. His poems will be studied and presented in a more detailed manner in the following chapters.

Esther Syiem (1958) teaches English Literature at NEHU and besides writing poetry, is also involved in the study of Khasi folk literature. A bilingual writer, she too has several publications to her credit. Some of her works include *Oral Scriptings* (2005) and *Of Follies and Frailties of Wit and Wisdom* (2010), and *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative* (2011). Many of her works focus on the culture and oral tradition of the Khasi as she tries to give relevant and incisive insights into a society that is still struggling to maintain the balance



between the modern and the traditional. Her poems also reflect her concern for the plight of woman in a society that subordinates women.

Temsula Ao (1945) is a retired Professor and a Padma Shri awardee (2007) with a number of published works. These include her five poetry collection namely *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992), *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003) and *Songs From The Other Life* (2007). She also published *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988 – 2007* (2013) which is a collection of all the poems from her five poetry collection previously published. She also published other works entitled *Henry James' Quest for an Ideal Heroine* in 1989 and an ethnographic work called *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (1999). She has two collection of short stories titled *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009) and a memoir entitled *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014).

The works of Ao reflect her concern over the treatment meted out on nature and the environment and the resultant destruction of lush forests and mountains. Her poems are also manifestations of her pride in the traditional practices and customs of her people and her desire to see the legends and myths of the Ao-Nagas revived. Her poems also show her passion for the cause of women and other marginalized sections of the society. In the words of GJV Prasad, Temsula Ao:

...writes with a great sense of assuredness, mastering the longer line and asserting more control while following her soaring poetic vision, in the course of her writing journey. She sings with great honesty of her life and that of her community, becoming a true bard. She would be a natural elder, someone to turn to for nuggets of wisdom culled from the collective past. But she is also an individual, a woman, and someone who has worn

different hats in her life, but has searched for an integrity beyond the facades that are presented to the world... (xxxviii)

Monalisa Changkija (1960) is a journalist, a poet, a writer and a Chameli Devi Jain awardee (2010). She is proprietor, publisher and editor of a daily newspaper called Nagaland Page. Her publications include *Weapons of Words of Pages of Pain* (1993) and *Monsoon Mourning* (2007) which are collections of her poems and *Cogitating for a Better Deal* (2014) which is a critique of Naga society. Her poems primarily deal with the social issues that inflict the conflict-ridden state of Nagaland. Many of her poems resist the subjugation of women which is rampant in a patriarchal society. Her poems also expose her political awareness as they depict the relationship between Nagaland and the Indian nation at large. In her poem “Of a People Unanswered III” she questions the impositions that the Nagas have to submit themselves to as a result of the perpetual conflicts in their land and asserts that she will not be controlled:

... I am more  
 than a machine  
 or a mass of molecules.

Robin Ngangom (1959) from Manipur is a bilingual poet who writes in English and Manipuri. He too is from academia teaching English literature at NEHU, Meghalaya, and is one of the most well-known poets of North-east India. He has published three collections of poems which include *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). He also co-edited *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (2003) and *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from Northeast India* (2009) with Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. According to Ngangom:

The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but must perforce master the art of witness. (ix)

He may then be regarded as a witness of the many political challenges in North-east India and particularly Manipur where he was born and raised. His poems reflect his awareness of the insurgency and state sponsored terrorism as well as activities of ethnic cleansers and corrupt officials of his homeland. In the midst of all these, he harbors a penchant for his homeland and has taken to celebrating it in several of his poems.

Yumlam Tana (1976) is a poet cum cartoonist from Arunachal Pradesh. He has a collection of poems titled *The Man and the Tiger* (2000). He teaches English at a school and is passionate about writing. His poems reflect his obsession with the myths and traditional practices of his land. In his poem “The Man and the Tiger” he writes about the Nyishi myth that traces the brotherhood of man and the tiger. However, the two had part ways as the tiger suddenly developed the physical features of the beast:

A mere flow of blood in veins, a genetic identity,

Will not suffice to call a brother, my brother.

It is the flesh

More than the blood, my dear brother.

So the tiger must stalk in the forest

To kill and spill blood for blind appetite

And the man, a social animal,

Search an Ideology to suit his Intellect.

Mamang Dai (1957) is a journalist, writer, poet, former civil servant and Padma Shri awardee (2011) based in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh. She has also received the Verrier Elwin Award from the State government of Arunachal Pradesh in 2003. One of the most well-known names in North-east India, she has a number of publications which include fiction, non-fiction, poetry collection and children's books. Her latest publication *The Black Hill* was published in 2015. Her poetry collections include *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008), and *Midsummer: Survival Lyrics* (2014). Dai's works reflect her deep attachment to her roots, and question if "the traditional values systems, the ritual gods" will survive the "onslaught of guns, insurgency, counter insurgency, state and non state violence" (Gill 2).

Cherrie L. Chhangte (1977) is from Mizoram and teaches literature at Mizoram University. Her poems reflect her desire to be seen and recognized as a person with "personal needs" and not just as a representative of her tribe. Her attempts to do away with the prejudices and assumptions that often surround a person from the hills of North-east India are important features of her poetry. In her poem "Plea" she writes:

Disorient yourself.

Discard the prejudices and assumptions,

Delink the past from the present,

The legacy of customs, tradition and learning,

I would rather be a temporal reality

Than an intangible wisp of memory.

It is evident that the histories of their lands have affected the writings of the selected poets. For a better understanding of their poems and the circumstances that may have provoked the sentiments and ideas articulated in the poems, a brief historical overview of the eight states of North-east is given below.

Arunachal Pradesh became the twenty fourth state of the Union Territory in 1987. As per Census of India 2011, it has a population of roughly 1.4 million who belong to twenty six major tribes including the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Bugun, Galo, Hrosso, Koro, Meyor, Monpa, Tagin, Mishmi, Lonchang and several other sub-tribes. Arunachal Pradesh was formerly called the North-East Frontier Agency and was renamed Arunachal Pradesh on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1972 when it became a Union Territory. Arunachal Pradesh was ceded to the British government by the Tibetan government with the Simla Accord (1914). The Simla Accord was the result of an initiative taken by the British government to create a boundary for North-east India which was at the time blurred at the trading town of Tawang, the far northeast corner of Arunachal Pradesh. Till date, Arunachal Pradesh faces threats from the Chinese government which claims that Tawang belongs to them as they do not consent to the Simla Accord. Though relatively free of internal conflicts as compared to their counterparts in North-east India, Arunachal Pradesh is not entirely free of internal intra-hostilities. The face of Arunachal Pradesh has gone through several transformations after the colonial period. Many of their cultural beliefs and customs are now diluted or phased out due to encounters first with the British and later with people from mainland India. In fact, today the official language of Arunachal Pradesh is Hindi. Arunachal Pradesh also faces the challenge of the illegal influx and settlement of foreigners, especially from the Chakma and Hajong refugees. The several thousands of refugees have created a sense of marginalization among indigenous tribes like the Noctes, Wangchow, Khamtis, Singphos and Tsangas in the

eastern-most part of Arunachal. Meanwhile in the western part of the state, Tibetans, Bhutanese and Nepalese are exerting demographic dominance over the indigenous Monpas, Sherdukpens, Akas and Mijis. The floating population of Bangladeshis in the central part of the state has also created tension among Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Apatani and Tagin tribes (Nijeesh).

Assam became a state of the Union of India when India gained Independence in 1947. According to Census of India 2011, it has a population of over 31 million and besides the majority Assamese Hindus, it is also home to several indigenous tribes like the Bodo, Mishing, Dimasa, Karbi, Rabha and a number of other smaller plain tribes. Attempts have been made to reconstruct the obscure ancient history of Assam from literature and historical stories like the Mahabharata. According to SK Sharma and Usha Sharma, it was named *Pragiyotishpura* which means a place of eastern astronomy during 1000-600 BC and was later referred to as *Kamarupa* Kingdom from the fourth to twelfth century after which it was conquered and ruled by the Ahoms from 1228 to 1821 (ix). The first reliable history about Assam is found in the narrative of Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang who visited the region in 640 AD and found it occupied “by a race of dark yellow complexion, small in stature and fierce in appearance, but upright and studious” (Allen et al. 27). During the Ahom rule, Assam faced many invasions which were all successfully repelled until it gradually fell to repeated Burmese invasions in 1821. The British government then seized power over Assam in 1826 with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo between the East India Company and the King of Burma. A separate province of Assam was created with Shillong as its capital in 1874 when the Assam territory was separated from Bengal. After being accorded with statehood in 1947, the different provinces of Assam have been divided into states. Assam has a long history of migration of outsiders. During the British administration, thousands of Biharis migrated into Assam to work on the tea-plantations while thousands of

Bengali peasants settled on the vast uncultivated tracts of Assam. Between 1939 and 1947, Muslim communalists encouraged Bengali Muslim migration into Assam. The Partition of India in 1947 again resulted in a large scale influx from Pakistani Bengal into Assam. Till date, Assam continues to face the problem of large scale refugee/migrant influx.

The continuing demographic transformation of Assam led to apprehensions among the Assamese who feared that outsiders settling in Assam would result in the indigenous people becoming a minority. Such a situation could result in the subordination of their language and culture, as well as in the loss of control in the economic and political avenues. In 1979, it came to the attention of the general public that a large number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh who were believed to constitute of about thirty one to thirty four percent of the total population of the state had become voters. This led to the Assam Movement also known as the Assam Agitation (1979-1985) which was spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). The main objective of this movement was to compel the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants. More than two thousand people were reported to have died during this movement. In 1985, a Memorandum of Settlement known as the Assam Accord was signed between representatives of the Government of India and the leaders of the Assam Movement to bring an end to the agitation. The Accord authorized the Government of Assam to detect and deport illegal migrants who entered Assam after January 1966. Till date, Assam continues to be ridden with conflicts that stem out of various aspirations which include separatist movements, insurgency and ethnic hostilities.

Manipur achieved statehood in the year 1972 and has a population of approximately 2.7 million according to Census of India 2011. Manipur is the home of the Meiteis – the major ethnic group - who live in the valley region, while about thirty different tribes which include the Pangal,

Amar, Kuki, Paite, Thadou, Tangkhul, Maram, Angami, Hmar, Simte, Vaiphei, Gangte and several other smaller tribes live in the hilly region. The ancient history of Manipur is obscure and mostly constructed through legends and myths. Manipur existed as a princely state during the British rule and was at some point, a very powerful kingdom which invaded and was also invaded by neighboring Burma. Hinduism was adopted as the state religion of Manipur in 1714 during the rule of a king named Meidingu Pamheiba. After his death in 1754, Manipur was invaded and occupied by the Kingdom of Burma. In 1824, Gambhir Singh, the king of Manipur asked the British for help and the Burmese were expelled from the region with the help of the British military forces. The British government continued to interfere with the governance of Manipur and took Manipur under her protectorate. Manipur had its last ruler in Maharaja Bodhchandra Singh who ruled between 1941 and 1949. Following his abdication, the princely state of Manipur came to an end and was absorbed by the Government of India. On 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1949, Manipur was merged into India through a merger agreement between the Government of India and the then Maharaja of Manipur ending the era of the independent kingdom of Manipur.

Today, Manipur is one of the most conflict ridden states in India. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been operated here since 1958 with the entire region of Manipur proclaimed as “disturbed area” since 1980 under this Act. Atrocities committed under AFSPA has frequently led to the harassment and even death of innocent civilians but are justified as necessary by the Central Government due to the existence and agitations of the many insurgent separatist rebel groups. The people of Manipur had hopes of enjoying respect with the merger of their state into the Indian Union. However, Manipur was kept under part ‘C’ states which is the lowest category of states in India and were denied democratic rights by the central government which made claims that Manipur was not qualified to enjoy the fruits of democracy.



Such circumstances provoked separatist activities among the dissatisfied youth of Manipur (Singh 57). However, the conflicts and violence in Manipur is not just between insurgent groups and the government but also between ethnic groups like the Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis, and of late, between the Meiteis of the plains and the tribal groups of the hilly regions over three proposed bills – the Protection of Manipur People Bill 2015, Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Bill 2015, and Manipur Shops and Establishments Bill 2015 pertaining to the protection of the indigenous people of Manipur.

Meghalaya became an autonomous state in 1972 and has a population of roughly 2.9 million according to Census of India 2011. Meghalaya is markedly different from the other states of North-east India in that it follows by tradition, the matrilineal lineage. However, this tradition does not grant the womenfolk any power as is explained in the essay “Eroding Traditional Values: The Role of U Kni (The Maternal Uncle) in Present Day Society as Depicted in Khasi Short Stories” by Bandarilin Bairo. In a Khasi society, a man holds dual roles: as ‘U Kni’ (Maternal uncle) of the clan and as ‘U Kpa’ (a father) of his children. ‘U Kni’ holds the responsibility of advising his clan members with matters concerning the management of property, of completing all rituals during marriage, in a funeral and other important events in the family. Even the youngest daughter or sister of a family who is the custodian of the ancestral property cannot make decisions on property without his consent (188).

The three large tribes found in Meghalaya are the Khasi, Achik (Garo) and Jaintia. They had their own kingdoms until they came under the British rule during the nineteenth century. The region was eventually incorporated into Assam in 1835. With the partition of Bengal on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1905 by Lord Curzon, the Khasi Hills became a part of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and eventually became a part of the province of Assam when the partition

was reversed in 1912. At the time of Indian independence in 1947, Meghalaya constituted two districts of Assam. In 1960, a movement for a separate hill state began eventually resulting in the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 which accorded an autonomous status to Meghalaya. Since its conception as a state, Meghalaya has been plagued by various inter-ethnic conflicts and insurgency which threatens the peace and harmony of the state. Organizations and groups formed by indigenous members of the community have also taken initiatives to cleanse Meghalaya of all outsiders creating an unsafe environment especially for non-tribals.

Mizoram became a full fledged state of the Indian Union in 1986 and has a population of a little over one million according to Census of India 2011. The Mizo as a majority, and the Lai, Mara and Chakma tribes as minorities are found in Mizoram. Not much is known of the early history of the Mizo but oral history suggests that they migrated from the Chin State of Burma into Mizoram around 1700 AD (Lalthangliana 87) though some historians place it much earlier. The earliest documented records of Mizoram were of their frequent raids of the Chittagong Hill Tracts which was within the jurisdiction of the British government in the mid 1850s. Military expeditions in 1871 and 1889 resulted in the annexation of the entire Lushai Hills by the British military forces. After India gained independence, it became the Lushai Hills district under the Government of Assam. The district was declared a Union Territory in 1972 and was renamed Mizoram adopting a nomenclature which is culturally more inclusive than Lushai Hills.

Mizoram went through a period of political unrest which lasted twenty years. An underground uprising against the government was started in the year 1966 by the Mizoram National Front (MNF) with the objective of achieving a sovereign independence from India. The uprising was quelled with the signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986 between representatives from the underground self-styled MNF government and the Indian government.

Today, Mizoram enjoys considerable peace and harmony compared to neighboring states like Manipur though there are still instances of ethnic conflicts, particularly between the Mizos and Bru. In Mizoram, the Church and the NGO Young Mizo Association (YMA) play important roles in shaping the individual and collective values of the people. Patnaik writes in his essay “Mizoram : A Model of Peace” that “an element of compatibility between traditional values and modern attitudes” is present in Mizoram because of the “vibrancy generated by YMA” (140).

Nagaland became the sixteenth state of India in 1963. According to Census of India 2011, it has a population of nearly two million. There are several major tribes in Nagaland, seventeen of which are now officially recognized by the state. They are Ao, Angami, Chang, Konyak, Lotha, Sumi, Chakhesang, Khiamniungan, Dimasa Kachari, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam, Yimchunger, Kuki, Zeme-Liangmai (Zeliang), Pochury and Rongmei. Besides these, there are several other sub-tribes. The ancient history of the Nagas too is nebulous though there are historic records which show that the Nagas had settled in the Naga Hills before the advent of the Ahoms in Assam in the year 1228. Till the arrival of the British, most of these communities depended on hunting, food gathering and shifting cultivation for their livelihood (Srikanth and Thomas 58). They had their own indigenous systems of governance which was accepted by all the members of the Naga community prior to the arrival of the British in the Naga Hills in 1832. Ten military expeditions on the Nagas were recorded by the British between 1839 and 1850. The British eventually decided to leave them alone when they realized that the Nagas were skilled warriors, but the Nagas continued to raid the British in Assam. In 1866, the British established a post in Samaguting with the goal of ending intertribal warfare and raids. The British administration consolidated their power over a large area of the Naga Hills and integrated it into its Assam operations between 1880 and 1922. After 1947, the Naga Hills remained a province of

Assam but due to strong nationalist feelings that rose among the Nagas, the Naga National Council (NCC) led by Phizo demanded a political union of their ancestral and native groups. This movement resulted in a long period of political turmoil and disharmony in the region leading to the death of many lives as well as the destruction of many properties. Though the achievement of statehood brought the major conflicts to an end, Nagaland, till date, continues to be burdened with political unrest and failed Peace talks. The Nagas today long for a peaceful society as Namrata Goswami observes in her essay “The Naga Rebel Groups’ Narratives of Dissent” that “what is crucial is the earnest desire amongst Naga civil society for a peaceful resolution of the decades-old crisis” (129).

Sikkim was awarded statehood in 1975 to become the twenty second state of India and has a population of approximately 6.1 lakhs according to Census of India 2011. The groups of people found in Sikkim include the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Limbu. Sikkim is located in a strategic location, surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan , West Bengal and Tibet Autonomous Region of China. According to Manger Amit, its location resulted in an influx of peoples from different parts of the world such as Bhutia, Nepali, and other communities along with the Lepchas, the original inhabitants of Sikkim, during different historical period (60). The history of Sikkim also tells of contacts between Hindus and Tibetans in earlier times which was followed by the establishment of a Buddhist kingdom or Chogyal in the seventeenth century. Sikkim emerged as a polity in its own right against a backdrop of incursions from Tibet and Bhutan, during which the kingdom enjoyed a certain degree of independence. The British government established trade routes with Tibet as a result of which Sikkim fell under the British rule until 1947. Sikkim, at first remained an independent country until it was annexed by India in 1975.

Tripura attained statehood in 1972 and has a population of over 3.6 million according to the Census of India 2011. Tripura is home to many tribes which include Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Boroks, Darlong, Hrangkhawl, Chakma, Garo, Haram, Jamatia, Khashia, Kuki and several other smaller tribes. Tripura is mentioned in the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the Edicts of Ashoka. The region was under the rule of the Twipra (Tippera) Kingdom for centuries but there are no documentations to show when the Twipra rule began. Several Muslim invasions of the region culminated in the Mughal dominance of the plain areas of the region in 1733. Tripura became a princely state during the British rule in India. After the independence of India, Tripura became a Union Territory in 1956. Following the partition of India, many Bengali Hindus migrated illegally to Tripura as refugees from East Pakistan. The indigenous communities of Tripura known as Tripuris have become a minority and are facing the danger of being subordinated. Ethnic strife and insurgency has led to scattered violence in the state. In Tripura, about 82.95 percent of the population lives in the rural areas with agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and allied activities being the main occupations of the people (Bhattacharya 111).

As the observations made on the histories of the eight states of North-east India suggest, the region has been troubled by insurgency and ethnic clashes and continues to be so even today. According to SR Tohring, the “ethnic clashes in North-East after India’s independence are, at times, worse than any of the bloody clashes in the rest of the country in terms of brutality, heavy toll on innocent human lives, properties, and span of conflicts but mostly they went unnoticed” (xi). Nani G. Mahanta in her essay “Accommodating ‘The Third Voice’ in Conflict Zones” also draws a conclusion as follows:

The identity politics of North East India has been hijacked by insurgent groups. Civil society, which has played a crucial role in the region, has been relegated to the periphery.

The state, seeking to placate the insurgents, has neglected the people's voice. In order to find a quick solution it has neglected various aspects of durable peace building. The current peace discourses in the North East are more elite-centric and understand peace as absence of violence. When all those most affected by conflict have a voice in open and inclusive decision-making processes, it fosters conflict transformation and consolidation of peace. Peace-making and peace building processes that are informed by diverse points of view may contribute to a more lasting and stable peace rather than relying on a single rebel group whose representative character and legitimacy is always in doubt. (105-06)

The past and present political, social, cultural and religious scenario of the states has resulted in literature that is as vibrant and diverse as the region. The poetry of the region in particular has responded to British colonialism and its aftermath as well. The nature of many of these poems makes them interesting subjects of postcolonial literature that offers resistances and counter-voices on the impact of institutionalized religion, identity and the condition of women, and these are the parameters, amongst others, that have been selected for this research.

This dissertation has been divided into five chapters. The first chapter titled "Introduction" contains an introduction to the entire study, undertaking the task of putting into perspective the approach of the dissertation work on the selected poems. The selected poets are introduced with a brief history of their states to get a clearer view of their socio, economic, religious, cultural and political background. The chapter also gives a brief account of the term "counter", particularly in the context of this study.

The second chapter titled "Institutionalized Religion and Counter-voices" will make a study of the religious background of the communities of North-east India and elaborate upon the changes brought about by colonialism and other outside influences. It will provide an insight of

what the term religion entails and the significance of religion on man's life. The relegation of the indigenous belief systems into the periphery will also be taken into consideration in this study. The growth of institutionalized religions, especially that of Christianity will be observed to see the impact they have on indigenous belief systems. This study will be made with references to the poems by Temsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond L Kharmawphlang and Mamang Dai and emphasis will be laid on Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The selected poems will be examined to see the various counter-voices they have raised in their attempts to resist the organized religions that have been introduced to them. Though these organized religions have proved to be advantageous in many ways, they have also played an instrumental role in the loss of many traditional and cultural values which were an intrinsic part of the unique identities of the communities of North-east India. The counter-voices have been presented from various aspects, some only subtly hinting while some are more blunt and direct.

The third chapter titled "Counter-voices on Identity" will raise the issue of identity with emphasis on the tribal communities of North-east India. The people of North-east India have often been clubbed together as one homogeneous entity under the umbrella term North-east. This is a misconception which often results in the stereotyping of the geographically, linguistically and ethnically diverse eight states. Writers from the region present their rich cultures and traditions to "create greater awareness of the variety, the diversity and the plurality of the region" and "dispel the misconceptions" (Zama 7). This chapter will probe into the various methods employed by poets from the region to dispel such misconstrued notions. The terminologies that have been applied to describe the indigenous communities of the eight states that comprise of North-east India will also be studied and an elaboration of the term identity will also be

provided. In many ways, colonialism, globalization and modernity have proven to be instrumental in diluting the ethnic identities that make a community unique. The encounter, and gradual assimilation of a group of indigenous people with outsiders over a period of time results in the adoption of values and customs introduced by the outsiders. This will be studied with reference to selected works by poets from North-east India. The voices that have been raised by the selected poets with regards to their identity will be scrutinized to see how they attempt to counter or resist the stereotypes as well as prejudices that the North-east people often face from their mainland counterparts. Poems by Cherrie L. Chhangte, Paul Lyngdoh, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai and Yumlam Tana will be referred to as voices from the North-east.

The fourth chapter has been titled “Counter-voices of Women” and will undertake to study the voices that represent women belonging to the North-east region of India. In many ways, women have been silent and do not articulate their feelings and thoughts. The notion that women belonging to communities that were formerly colonized as “doubly colonized” by the patriarchal system as well as the dominant alien culture will be explored in this chapter. Women poets like Temsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija and Esther Syiem have been selected for their vivid portrayal of the lives of women in their respective societies. Their poems are observations on the conditions of women within their own social fabric. The poems depict the hardships a woman goes through both physically and mentally. However, the selected women poets have not remained silent and have taken to articulating their thoughts and beliefs regarding the condition of women. They have raised counter-voices in their refusal to be subjugated and resisted the conventional roles imposed upon women within their own social structures.



The final chapter “Conclusion” will highlight the important parameters dealt with in the previous chapters. This chapter, after careful observation of the counter-voices and resistances will present its findings.

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## INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION AND COUNTER-VOICES

This chapter focuses on how some poets from tribal communities have questioned the superiority of the new religion that they had been introduced to by the missionaries from the West. Through a gradual and continuous intrusion into their cultural lives, the missionaries convinced a large number of the indigenous people that their native faiths and beliefs are “tedious primitive nonsense” (Ao, Oxford 81). Through an analysis of selected poems, an attempt will be made to show how the post-colonial poets from North-east India will seek to revalidate their native faiths and beliefs.

Religion has always played an important role in man’s life. Edward B Taylor defines religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" in *Primitive Culture* (13). William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) also writes of religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (15). These definitions show that men see themselves in connection to a supernatural being or a divine entity, and this sense of connection or relation guides them in their way of thinking and in their actions. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary also defines religion as “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader” (Hornby 479). It is believed that all cultures have a belief system that plays an important role in shaping the belief systems of members of the community. J. Troisi in his book *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1979) among the Santals writes “There are no peoples, however primitive, who are without religion” (1). He continues, “Religion interacts significantly with other cultural institutions to such an extent that no social phenomenon presents a larger range of expression and implication” (ibid). There are many theories about the origin of religion but

broadly speaking, they may be classed under the intellectualist approach and emotionalist approach. According to the intellectualist approach, religious beliefs in primitive societies are “an intellectual attempt on the part of primitive man to understand natural phenomena and biological events” (ibid 2). The emotionalist approach, on the other hand, postulates that “primitive man’s belief in spiritual phenomena arose out of feelings of awe, wonder, fear, respect and admiration aroused by such natural entities as mountains and the sun or such natural occurrences as storms” (ibid 3).

Though there are many different kinds of faiths and beliefs, only a few are recognized as institutionalized or organized religions. These include Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism. They are accepted as institutionalized religion because their belief systems and dogmas are systematically arranged and formally established. Wherever these religions play a dominant role, other faith systems and beliefs are often relegated to the margins. For instance, during the British rule in India, the British Indian Census had a religious category with varying designations like ‘animists’, ‘naturalists’, ‘primitive’ and so on. However, this category was eliminated in the 1951 census which was the first census held in India after she became independent. The people who were previously designated as ‘animists’, ‘naturalists’ or ‘primitive’ were absorbed into Hinduism if they had not converted into Christianity, Islam or Buddhism (Oommen 10). However, being absorbed into Hinduism or being called Hindus did not change the religious beliefs and rituals of these people.

Though the presence of Christianity in India has a long history of over two thousand years, dating back to the time of the arrival of Christ’s Apostle St. Thomas in South India, it was only in the nineteenth century that Christianity entered North-east India through European and American missionaries. Even before the spread of Christianity in the region, existing indigenous



faith or religion was an important element in the life of the people. Though religion played a significant role, O.L. Snaitang writes that it lacked unifying power among most of the communities of the region. In some cases like that of the Khasis of Meghalaya, even members of the same clan did not share the same faith. The hill tribal religions did not have religious books, creeds or hymn books. There was no common worshipping place for the entire community either (146-47). In other words, it was not institutionalized. There were many superstitious beliefs and the belief in the existence of spirits resulted in fear, timidity and insecurity. Varying sacrifices and rituals were performed to appease the spirits. Their beliefs made the people relate misfortunes like deaths, accidents and diseases with the spirits and such misfortunes were attributed to irreverence on the part of human beings towards the spirits. They were willing to go to great lengths to pacify these spirits.

Much of the indigenous sets of beliefs of the people of North-east India have been absorbed or replaced by other dominant religions. According to 2011 Census of India, the percentage of Christian population has increased in all the states of North-east India except Nagaland. All the states with the exception of Manipur have also witnessed an increase in the percentage of Muslims. Meanwhile, Hindu population has decreased in all the states while it has increased in Nagaland. Other religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism mostly show a declining trend in all the states. The same census reveals the following data:

Arunachal has a 30.26% Christian population while it has 29.04 % of Hindus. The Buddhists also make up 11.77 % while the Muslims, Sikhs and Jains constitute 2.25 %. A population of 26.20 % also adheres to “Other Religions.”

In Assam, Hindus consist of the majority of the population with 61.47 %. The Muslims follow with 34.22 % while the Christians comprise of 3.74 % of the population. Buddhists, Jains

and Sikhs together add up to 0.33 % of the population. 0.09 % of the population belongs to “Other Religions.”

Manipur has 41.39 % of Hindus with the Christians following closely with 41.29 %. The Muslims comprise of 8.40 % of the population while the Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs make a small minority adding up to 0.36 %. Followers of “Other Religions” constitute of 8.19 %.

In Meghalaya, Christians make the majority community claiming 74.59 % of the population with Hindus forming 11.53 % of the population. The Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains together account for 4.85 % while 8.71 % have been grouped together under “Other Religions.”

Mizoram has 87.16 % of Christians and 8.51 % of Buddhists. The Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jains together form a small minority at 4.16 % while 0.07 % of the population is classified under “Other Religions.”

Nagaland too has Christians forming majority at 87.93 % while Hindus come next with 8.75 %. The Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains constitute 3.04 % while 0.16 % of the population adheres to “Other Religions.”

In Sikkim, Hindus make the majority with 57.76 % and the Buddhists come next with 27.39 %. Christians account for 9.91 % while the Muslims, Sikhs and Jains together add up to 1.98 % of the population while 2.67 % are members of “Other Religions.”

Tripura has the majority of its population adhering to Hinduism with Hindus numbering up to 83.40 % of the population. The Muslims comprise of 8.60 % of the population while the Christians add up to 4.35 %. The Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains together form 3.46 % of the population and 0.04 % claim to follow “Other Religions.”

There are small minorities of people in each state who have not stated their religions. Studying the percentage of people who follow organized religions and the percentage of people classified under “Other Religions”, one can surmise that only a very small percent of the population are still adhering to their indigenous faith systems.

Institutionalized or organized religions like Christianity and Islam are largely influential because of their systematic and formal establishments. In the process of colonizing a community, religion often plays an important role. The Ao Nagas of Nagaland are a fine example of how a new religion has facilitated in the adoption of a new way of life, paving the way for modernization for the community. Living in a remote corner of India, the Nagas had little or no contact with the outside world apart from cultural contacts with the Ahoms who came to Assam in the thirteenth century, mainly from northeast China, in search of fertile farmlands. They (the Ahoms) founded the famed Ahom kingdom (1228 – 1821) and ruled Assam creating a flourishing culture that is known in particular for its sacred texts and other manuscripts (GEO 42). Real exposure to the outside world for the Nagas came with the British annexation of Assam in 1826 following the treaty of Yandaboo. The Nagas allowed no outsiders to cross their frontier, though distant relationships were formed with their bordering neighbors. They practiced autonomous governance and were independent of foreign influences until the intervention of the colonial powers which resulted in a gradual cultural transformation, acceptance of modern education and the teachings of a new religion.

Christianity had its origin in Nagaland when the American Baptist missionary, Dr. Miles Bronson arrived in the year 1839 and started a school and a chapel at the Konyak Naga village at Namsang (Tohring 76). The first formal Baptist Church in Nagaland was formed several years later on 23 December 1872 in Mokokchung district of the Ao tribe (Lima 136). According to

Joseph Puthenpurakal, the last of the American Baptist missionaries, De Lano left the Naga Hills in 1955 (1). Before their encounter with foreigners, the Ao Nagas were animists who had their own set of beliefs and indigenous faith. They had supreme beings depicted in the masculine gender – Lijaba (Creator of the Earth), Lunkitsungba (Sky Chief) and Meyutsungba (Lord of the dead). A prophetess named Ongangla also acted as a mediator between the Supreme Being and the people (Lima 136).

The acceptance of Christianity by the Nagas marked a departure from their many tribal customs and traditions. Along with the spread of education through the medium of English, modernity as we know it today reached the Naga Hills. Before the arrival of the westerners, there was no record of teaching and learning of any script and opening of any formal school in the Naga Hills. Though the Nagas were not literate, they had their social institutions and indigenous knowledge systems for their survival and growth. For instance, the “Morung” or the bachelors’ dormitory for the young men of the village served as a centre where “younger generations were reared to manhood” and taught everything they need to know with regards to “manners, discipline, art, stories, songs, war tactics, diplomacy, religious and customary rites and ceremonies” (Thomas 11). Such dormitories as social institutions also existed in other tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh where they are called Moshup (for boys) and Rasheng (for girls) amongst the Adis, and in Mizoram where they are called Zawlbuk or exclusive male dormitories.

In her poem “Blood of Others,” Temsula Ao seeks to validate the indigenous faith of her people by questioning the motive and consequences of the religion that had been brought and taught to them by missionaries from the West. The poem opens with the line

In the bygone days of the other life

The opening line makes it clear that Ao is going to revisit the past which has become so obscured that it seems like a different life. The poem continues with these lines,

Before the advent of the WORD

Spilling the blood of foes

Was the honour-code

These lines reflect the kind of life led by the Nagas before Christian missionaries arrived in their midst bringing with them the “word” or the gospel. Prior to Christianity and the inculcation of biblical values, to kill and hunt the heads of enemies was a matter of great honor. For a warrior to kill an enemy was proof of his loyalty to his tribe as well as his bravery. But the teachings of the new religion brought by the Christian missionaries taught them otherwise.

The poem continues to tell about the great honor accorded to the brave warriors:

Head-takers became acclaimed

Tribal heroes, earning the merit

To wear special cloths and ornaments

And live in grand houses.

These lines clearly portray the kind of prestige the warriors enjoyed once they proved their prowess in battles. Coming home with the head of an enemy made a warrior an immediate hero among his people. He would also be deemed meritorious enough to wear clothes and ornaments that can only be worn by those who have had outstanding accomplishments. They would also be allowed to live in houses that were grander than those of the common man. In his essay titled “Administrators, Missionaries and a World Turned Upside Down: Christianity as a Tribal Response to Change,” Frederick S. Downs writes:

...headhunting was not simply a matter of taking trophies in wars. Heads were often taken in ambush, with those of women and children being especially prized because they proved the cleverness and daring of the ambusher in penetrating the inner defences of the enemy. The taking of heads was essential to the image of manhood (certain types of clothing and bodily ornaments could only be worn by men who had taken a head, and the more eligible young ladies would refuse to marry a man who had not) and was a necessary part of certain ceremonies that ensured the welfare of a family or a village and the fertility of the fields. The principal role of the men, and the basic social institutions of the village were closely related to raiding and head-hunting. (172)

During those times, the Naga animists believed that spirits lived in non-human entities like plants, animals and other forms of nature. They worshipped such spirits with a faith that was absolute and credulous because they were not exposed to other faith systems or beliefs. However, all this ended with the arrival of “a tribe of strangers” in the territories of the Nagas. Ao, in the same poem says that these strangers - the American Baptists, came:

Armed with only a Book and

Promises of a land called Heaven.

With the Bible in their hands, they taught the people about heaven and the conditions one must fulfill to enter the Promised Land. Many of the conditions require the Nagas to give up many aspects of their traditional practices and beliefs. The missionaries avowed that the various forms of nature like the trees, mountains, rocks and rivers were not gods and should not be worshipped. They even went to the extent of telling the people that the songs and stories that had been passed on orally from one generation to the next were just “tedious primitive nonsense.” The new faith replaced the stories of the Nagas with stories from the Bible. This created

confusion and a sense of alienation among the Nagas which gradually resulted in a break with their traditions and customs. Their knowledge of the past and their compliance with all things traditional soon became obliterated and “trivialized into taboo,” or superstitions. Ao writes of the tragic outcome when new teachings are imposed upon a people:

We no longer dared to sing  
 Our old songs in worship  
 To familiar spirits of the land  
 Or in praise to our legendary heroes.

Such circumstances made it impossible for the people to retain a sense of pride in their roots or their identity. Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih write in “Introduction” to *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-east India* (2009) “The literary legacy of the missionaries can be said to be double-edged. While, on the one hand, they gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other, they made them deny the existence of their own literatures in their rich oral traditions and taught them to be ashamed of whatever is theirs, as something pagan and preposterous” (xi). Charles Chasie in his essay “A Naga View of the World” expresses “It is our identity through a set of beliefs, and practices, that sets us apart from all others, and make us unique...” (259). When the traditional “set of beliefs, and practices” of a people are disturbed by alien beliefs, it can result in confusion and even sense of shame in one’s indigenous way of life. Ao writes that after being repeatedly told that their ways were primitive and not appropriate, her people “no longer dared to sing” in worship of their old gods and their legendary heroes. This resulted in a heavy corrosion of their indigenous way of life. When they dared to tell their stories, they had only the “silent forests” to listen to them. And the songs that had become rarely sung were heard only by the “passing wind”. Ao also writes that her land

which was once believed to have many gods was now “swept clean of ancient gods” because all their gods were declared invalid by the foreigners who taught them of a new god.

Ao vehemently asserts that her people were “stripped” of all the simple but significant mannerisms and customs that once made them unique and different. This made them lose their sense of identity as Nagas and made them deviate from their traditional practices and customs:

We strayed from our old ways

And let our soul-mountain recede

Into a tiny ant-hill...

Ao further laments that the minds of her people were brainwashed by the foreigners whose teachings were instrumental in the dismissal of their traditional means of knowledge and livelihood. She writes that the “strange intruders” cultivated the minds of the Nagas to conform to their instructions. Here she compares the minds of her people to a “tabula rasa” (blank slate or a young mind not yet affected by experience) on which a new history was being written while the existing genuine history of her people was being disregarded.

Ao describes deftly how her people suppressed themselves in order to abide by the norms that had been set forth for them by the foreigners. They gave up their gods and stopped praying to them which resulted in the loss of rituals and practices that were an intrinsic part of their culture. Captivated by the charms of the promised land narrated to them, they dismissed the appeals of the life which had been good enough for them for centuries prior to the arrival of the foreigners,

Ao also deplores the ease with which her people imitated the ways of the alien invaders:

We borrowed their minds,



Aped their manners,  
Adopted their gods  
And became perfect mimics.

These lines suggest that the Nagas began to think like the outsider, and emulated their way of life and in abiding by the teachings of the new religion, they came to accept it as if it were their own. They became what Ao calls “mimics”. The idea that a colonized subject often ends up mimicking the colonizer is an important aspect of postcolonial theory. The term mimicry has been employed to describe a range of postcolonial attitudes and practices. Its usage in theoretical contexts is now associated with the position taken by Homi K. Bhabha. In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” Bhabha describes mimicry as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85). He focuses on the fact that in regions formerly colonized like India, the colonizing authorities often required the indigenous people to serve them and English was used as a medium of instruction. He further adds on mimicry:

Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary power. (86)

The acquisition of the language of the foreigners has to be done through books or oral teachings, and in this process much is learnt of the ways of the foreigners. The indigenous people too often take pride in their knowledge and acquisition of language, manners and behavioral

traits of their colonizers. To a great extent, such colonial mentality is a result of the sense of inferiority ingrained by cultural indoctrination of the Other.

Frantz Fanon, a psychotherapist who studied and exposed the connection between colonialism and mental illness also writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963):

In order to assimilate and to experience the oppressor's culture, the native has had to leave certain of his intellectual possessions in pawn. These pledges include his adoption of the forms of thought of the colonialist bourgeoisie. (38)

Ao also takes note of the changes brought about with the gift of their new script – the Roman script, from the missionaries. She writes that her people stopped drawing on the barks of wood and stones as was conventionally done. Instead, her people were taught a new script by the American missionaries who made them learn to write on paper with a pen or a pencil. The learning of a new script and the usage of paper and pen once again mean the loss of an ancient practice.

Ao's poem, however, takes on a different turn as she continues. She asserts:

But a mere century of negation

Proved inadequate to erase

The imprints of intrinsic identities

Stamped on minds since time began

Though the Nagas brought about several changes in their way of life and had discarded many of their ancient customs, the hundred odd years they lived under the influence of the westerners could not erase their identities as Nagas. Their memories of the past were not yet dimmed completely by their present lifestyles. Gradually, the people started to revive their

cultural practices and began to sing afresh the old songs that had not been sung for many years. They started telling the stories that had previously been passed on orally from one generation to the next but had lost significance among the new generation children. The resurfacing of these traditional songs and stories resulted in a new wave of nationalism which believed it is disloyal to “the essential self” to abandon traditional values for an alien one.

Ao insists that this re-awakening of the songs and stories of their forefathers brought about a new group of cultural heroes. In the old days, being a cultural hero would imply one’s prowess in a battle and the ability to take the heads of enemies but the new group of cultural heroes indicates different characteristics from the previous ones. This time, instead of warring with other tribes, they battle against the heavy influence of foreign ways which are becoming a threat to their culture and tradition. The enemies are no longer people who try to seize their lands or women from them. They now have to fight against the forces that dilute their culture and deny them their identities as Nagas. In an attempt to counter this, the new “cultural heroes” postulate that their identities as Nagas be restored. They also demand the reconstruction of their ancestral grounds in an effort to emerge victorious against their battle with the infiltration of foreign ways.

The poem ends with an acknowledgment of the perpetual chaos that disturbs the Naga hills:

In the agony of the re-birth

Our hills and valleys reverberate

With death-dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms

As the throw-back generation resurrects.

This poem “Blood of Others” makes an interesting post colonial study. An important step for a once colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. This can be achieved only if the people take pride in their culture and attempt to glorify their history and traditional values. The colonizers devalue the past of their occupied colonies, and see their “precolonial era as pre-civilized limbo, or even as a historical void” and children will be made to think of “history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans” (Barry 186). Many writers from North-east India have taken it upon themselves to validate their history, faith and culture through their writings. Sometimes their attempts takes on a rebellious turn as can be seen in another poem by Ao called “Musings During a Sermon”. In this poem, Ao subverts the notion that the Promised Land taught to them by the foreign missionaries is a wonderful place. Here in this poem she writes of her belief that heaven as it is described to them will not be such a good place. Her opening lines are very assertive of her opinion:

Heaven must be a peculiar place

Where there is no day, no light

No need of the sun.

The quotation given below from the Bible (New International Version) describes heaven in Rev. 22: 1-5

Then the angel showed me the river of the flowing water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down from the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be

on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of the lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.

From the above lines from Ao's poem and the verses from the Bible, it looks like Ao wishes to dismiss the idea of heaven being a wondrous and marvelous place. For Christians, ascension to heaven after their life on earth is the ultimate goal. The promise of heaven was an important factor that enticed the Nagas to convert into Christianity. Ao continues her poem with the lines

Where, they say, there will be no crying

But only perpetual singing.

These lines may be read as a reaction to the Bible (NIV) which proclaims in Rev. 21: 3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".

The insistence that the promises of a new land may not be a particularly satisfactory abode is a manifestation of Ao's endeavor to undermine the foreign concept of an afterlife which had come to be accepted by her people. The succeeding lines continue in the same tone:

No marriages either

No vows given or broken

Hence no ecstasy

Of consummation

Or the pain of desolation.

But sadder still

No thrill of re-conciliation

In a vow re-constructed

And a life re-surrected.

Yet again, these lines reflect the biblical version of the next life. The Bible (NIV) says in  
Matt. 22:30

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like  
the angels in heaven.

As she contemplates such a life and decides that it would be sad and without thrill contrary to  
popular Christian belief. She suggests that she would rather feel pain as even pain can eventually  
turn into happiness when the cause of pain has been removed or altered positively.

Her poem continues to talk about heaven as a place which does not offer much  
excitement:

Heaven must be a monotonous place

With only the present continuing

The present

Which has no past

No future

Because

In heaven they say

There is no yesterday

Only the NOW

Stretching into eternity.

The Bible (NIV) talks about the concept of time in Rev.10:6 as follows:

And he swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, “There will be no more time.”

Yet again, Ao discards another aspect of life in heaven asserting that it would be too tedious and would offer nothing to arouse the excitement of people who have made it to heaven. This dismissal is again evidence of Ao’s attempt to question the supposed joy and peace that a life in heaven entails according to the teachings of the western missionaries. She desires a life different from the one promised to her if she would abide by the teachings of the Bible as she declares in her final lines:

If this be heaven

Give me no share therein

Give me instead

All of the yesterdays,

Todays and tomorrows

Of this life of joys

And sorrows.

Ah, for me, a life of diversity!

Deliver me from an eternity

Of uncurious monotony.

Ao's poem "Musings During a Sermon" ends with these lines of proclamation that reaffirms her desire to be delivered from a life in heaven if it means a life of "uncurious monotony". In "Temsula Ao: An Introduction," GJV Prasad observes that:

Temsula Ao shows her growing sense of unease with organized religion and religious dogma. She realizes that people are cut off from their mythologies, from their past imaginaries, and that this is a terrible loss. (xxi)

The people of Meghalaya have a story that corresponds with that of the Nagas with regards to religion. Similar to the Naga society, an important force which contributed to cultural changes in the Khasi society was the advent of Christian missionaries. The Khasis had their own indigenous religion called Niam Khasi in which personal religious relationships were formed between U Blei (God) and the people. Believing that U Blei is the guardian spirit of the family, they also interacted with U Leilongkur U Leilongjait (God of the clan), U Leihima (God of the state), U Leikhyrdop (God of the village) and U Leimuluk U Leijaka (God of the raid) (Talukdar 32). However, these indigenous gods and the rituals and practices associated with them came to be gradually disregarded as conversion into Christianity became widespread after the first Mission Centre in Meghalaya was established in Cherrapunjee in 1810 by Krishna Chandra Pal, a missionary of the Baptist Missionaries of Serampore. Gradually, more missionaries came to the region, and established schools, and converted many of the Khasis into Christianity. In *The Missionary Among the Khasis* (1977), N Natarajan writes that the missionaries served the British



administration in furthering the interest of the administrators who “felt that the best way to tame the primitive Khasis was through love which the missionaries alone could give” (63). Though the missionaries came to preach the gospel of Christ, the “spiritual and temporal arms of the Christian missionaries contributed to the imposition of the attitudes, norms, values and world view of the British, who being the political heads could emphasize this domination” (Talukdar 1). Certain rules were also created by the missionaries to govern the behavior of the new converts. They were:

1. They should completely disclaim all traditional religious practices and rituals.
2. They should faithfully observe Sundays (Sabbath) i.e. by attending church and not doing any work.
3. They should have knowledge of the fundamental principles of Christianity.
4. They should live in a manner befitting the Gospel. (ibid 35)

Desmond Kharmawphlang from Meghalaya reacts to the cultural invasion of his people in his poems where he raises his counter-voice. In his poem “Letter from Pahambir,” he describes the journey he took along with his friends to Pahambir which is a small jungle village in the North Khasi Hills. Pahambir is an important place for the Khasis as many elements of their cultural and traditional customs are still practiced there. In order to have a better understanding of the poem and the counter-voice it offers, a description of Pahambir is crucial. Kharmawphlang himself describes the place in his essay “When the Stone Crumbles”:

Pahambir has its own body of traditional administrators who are charged with the task of village governance in ways, which are intrinsically linked, with the indigenous faith of the Khasis. All activities of the villages, ranging from the occupational to the

social and are informed by ceremonies and practices, many of which are religious in nature. Like many other elders in the village who played similar roles, Dorbar Nongkoun was the virtual priest of his clan Khasi which included various sisters and their children and grand children, his brothers and all who traced their descent from the Nongkoun *Iawbei Tynrai* or Nongkoun ‘grandmother of the root’ (i.e. the root of the clan).

Religious practices are family and clan-oriented. Adherence to the system is rigid and it determines the lifestyle of the people. Agriculture is the mainstay of Pahambir’s economy. The agricultural calendar is determined by elaborate ceremonies of libation and offering, without which no agricultural activity is taken up. The ceremonies have continued through generations of practice, and the roles of the key players are handed down from maternal uncle to nephew, brother to brother, sister to sister and mother to daughter. The close-knit structure of the clans often means that villages are populated exclusively by certain clans whose beliefs are rooted in traditions practised since time immemorial. The clans are the Marin, Lyngdoh, Lapang, Nongkoun, Makri and Nongshli. Marin is the chief’s clan, Lyngdoh the priest clan, Lapang, Nongkoun and Nongshli the clans representing village elders and the Makri, the herald and master of ceremonies clan. The social and religious functions of the clans are clearly defined and strictly observed during ceremonies conducted for the times of community or village. However, each clan has its own set of belief systems when the performances of clan ceremonies are contingent. (53-54)

Pahambir is, as described above, a place of extreme cultural significance. Kharmawphlang consciously chose it to be the setting of his poem. His poem describes how

along with some friends, he travelled to Pahambir where they met a village chief in their yearning to rediscover their past and culture. The poem thus opens:

At sundown we set out in a car,  
 Past silent, dark huts,  
 Cicadas buzzing the dusk.

An important feature of poets from North-east India is their close affinity with nature in its various forms in their poetry. According to Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in their Introduction to *Dancing Earth*, they are “bound together by their great love for the land and everything that it signifies can be seen in the overarching presence of nature in many of their poems...” (xii). Kharmawphlang’s poems too reflect this as is evident from the first three lines.

His descriptive poem continues:

We have left the church far behind,  
 Glowing strangely in pallid  
 Arrogance, though the dust kicked up  
 By our passing.

Leaving the church behind on their way to Pahambir may also be read as symbolic of the actual distancing of the church not just as a building or a place of worship by the Christians. It may signify the desire of Kharmawphlang and his friends to distance themselves not just physically but also mentally and spiritually in their quest to rediscover their cultural past which has become obscured by the influence and teachings of the church. The church here is symbolic of Christianity and the teachings it has imposed on the indigenous people who had their own

religious beliefs and faiths. The use of the adjective “pallid arrogance” to describe the sight of the church is also telling of the opinion the poet has of the church as an institution that is weak with no life and zest, yet arrogant in its self-righteousness.

Upon reaching Pahambir, Kharmawphlang and his friends seek an audience with U Di, the village chief who obliged. As U Di tells them stories and chants songs stripping to his loincloth, the city men are reminded that they have denied their own traditions and culture while accepting and embracing a foreign one. The poem ends with a note of grief and regret as it closes with the lines:

... I examine  
 the great hurt I carry in my soul  
 for having denied my own.

The poem may be read and interpreted as a lament of the loss of many traditional Khasi practices and customs which the poet seeks to revive through the poem. However, the poem may also be read as a celebration of the traditional practices of the Khasis especially in the closing lines of the poem. The poem can also be read as a voice that counters the new teachings of the institutionalized religion which the poet sees as instrumental in diluting their old ways. In his essay “Cultural Memory and Remembrance: Exploring Orality and Identity in Northeast Poetry,” Narayan Ch. Gahatraj writes that “conflict between the past and present and their subtending realities” make their presence felt in the poems of Kharmawphlang. He also adds that this conflict is “sensitized deeply by his love for folk traditions, the oracles of the past, the folk narrator and the spoken oral tradition” (421).

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, another poet from Meghalaya takes on a more strident tone as he counters the forces of new religions and their consequences. In his poem “Relations”, he writes:

I want to cut off all ties with this place  
 and my zealot neighbours  
 whose great love for the Lord has turned them  
 into a blessed noise of the highest decibel.

In another poem titled “Rain Song 2000,” he again makes a mockery of religion and its many influences:

But religious men were convinced  
 the world is too riddled with sin .  
 Hindus have gored too many Samaritans.  
 Christians have forced too many conversions  
 and cocksure Seng Khasi should not  
 have ascended our holy mountain, Sohpet Bneng.

In this poem, he does not single out any religion and instead shows his disapproval of all religions that have taken the form of domineering forces. He also writes of his desire to “hear the wind moan from nocturnal silk strings” again in another poem of his called “Winter Song”. This poem talks about the season of Christmas which is an important festival of Christians. During this season, Christians and non-Christians alike are in a festive mood and homes get decorated with all kinds of ornaments. Seeing everybody getting into the spirit of an alien religion brings out longing in the poet. He longs for music from the “silk strings” which is a traditional duitara

music. This longing reflects his intense awareness that alien cultures and religions have dominated the indigenous culture and religion of his people.

The resistance to the influence of established religions is also voiced by Mamang Dai, a poet from Arunachal Pradesh albeit with a more diplomatic tone. She attempts to validate the indigenous belief systems of her people as she proudly exclaims in her poem “The Balm of Time”:

Yes, I believe in gods.

In the forest faith

of good and evil,

spirits of the river,

and the dream world

of the dawn.

Dai, from the Adi tribe, speaks of the various gods of her people as opposed to the Christian teaching of one benevolent god who takes care of all the heavens and the earth. The Adis, like many other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, traditionally practice Donyi Poloism, an “animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence with the natural world” (Dai, *Legends of Pensam* xi). They worship natural objects like the Sun (Donyi) and Moon (Polo) as Supreme Beings who take care of the earth and humanity (Bath).

The transition from one worldview or religion to another, particularly of a dominant one, not only impacts but brings about tremendous change on a minority culture. Not all of its impact however, is necessarily negative. Christianity offers liberation from bondages and inflictions to its adherents. Many traditional rituals and practices of the North-east region prior to the arrival

of western missionaries and British colonization had a heavy toll on the people and were not always practical. That the exposure to different new teachings has been beneficial for the people of the region cannot be denied. However, the acceptance of a new worldview or religion necessarily entails the rejection or loss of the traditional and indigenous. In the process, much of the customary practices which define the indigenous people and give them a unique identity have been diluted or lost. Christianity as an institutionalized religion cannot be rejected in an attempt to revive indigenous belief systems and faiths, and this is not the point that the poets are conveying in their writings. It is a fact that efforts have been made in some quarters to revive customary practices and to accommodate them in today's world. Even if such a revival is not advocated, the acceptance of one's past and an understanding of one's history play an intrinsic role in shaping the identity of an individual, and this is what postcolonial poets and writers seek to convey through their writings, just as the poets of this study too, attempt through their writings.

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## COUNTER-VOICES ON IDENTITY

In North-east India, political colonization by a foreign power no longer exists today. It is of the past and is now a part of history. Colonialism, however, is still a reality through the presence of a dominant “mainland” or “mainstream” construct which is India just as smaller colonialisms exist within the narrower confines of the region itself, which often emanates from within their own social and political fabric. The issue that needs to be distinctly addressed, therefore, is how attitudes and mindsets of the region have been shaped by the encounter with various forms of colonialism. The negotiation with other cultures has resulted in generating questions about one’s identity and generated indignity amongst communities of the region due to such encounter. In other words, the experience of self doubt provoked questions about their own indigenous beliefs and cultural identity that so far, according to them, had set them apart and given them pride in their identity. They therefore sometimes believe that a hybridization of their native culture and an alien culture takes place as is borne out by some of the poems that are dealt with in this study. Hybridity as understood in literary discourse is the “creation of new cultural forms and identities as a result of the colonial encounter” (Nayar 200). The chapter will make a study of the psychological impact of such colonialisms that continues to plague the psyche of poets from the region, and will put forward the counter-voices that have been raised on identity.

In the context of colonialism, the concept of globalization is briefly referred to here as it indicates the “interconnectedness of socio-economic and cultural systems” (Mao 139) which continues to impact and endanger smaller identities in several ways. Globalization plays a major role in bringing about identity crisis, especially on members of communities that have been influenced by more dominant cultures. It is a very old and ancient process and may be traced back to the beginning of trade and commerce which is almost as old as mankind itself. Trading

and engaging in commercial activities created links between people from different regions as they sought to obtain their needs from each other. History bears witness to the fact that trade is often followed by exploitation of the weaker party. On this Mao has commented that trade and commerce of the European powers eventually led to socio-economic exploitation in due course of time (140). It is a fact that the Industrial Revolution which began in Europe during the mid eighteenth century revolutionized the economy, especially that of Britain, from agrarian to industrial. With the invention of machines which could produce goods at a mass scale, markets had to be found for these goods. India and China were targeted by the Europeans among other nations. Though the French, Dutch and the Portuguese tried to establish themselves in India, it was Britain which eventually succeeded in building and establishing their trade and commerce in India. Soon after consolidating their business empire through the East India Company in India, the British assumed political power over India and became the rulers of India. India has a long history of exploitation by the British which began with the arrival of the ships of the East India Company at Surat in 1608 and ended only in 1947 when India attained independence from British domination. It can be safely deduced that globalization and colonialism are therefore both instrumental in the formation of hybrid identities among members of affected communities.

Identity may be defined as the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity. It may also be described as the individual characteristics by which a thing or person is recognized or known. Identity, according to Nayar “is not simply a matter of race.” He goes on to say that “identities are constructed through multiple specificities: race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual preference, language, myth, history” (201). C. Larka, in his essay “Christianity and Tribal Identity” also posits that:

Identity in general is understood as a set of external features and internal traits which, negatively, distinguish an individual, or group of people from others and positively, render uniqueness through specific characteristics. This is the reason why even identical twins with plenty of similarities are two different individuals and so too are two different socio-ethnic groups. (31)

All these postulations on identity imply that each individual has an identity which may be personal, ethnic or cultural. Stereotyped identities may also be imposed on a people by outsiders as it has often been the case with the people of North-east India. For instance, anthropologists and administrators during the British Raj created the notion of a primitive and barbaric people when referring to natives of the region particularly from the hills in their writings. A surveyor from the British army, R.G. Woodthorpe writes that the Nagas are “bloodthirsty, treacherous and revengeful” (57). The veracity of this observation may be questioned as it has been made by an outsider who is not well-acquainted with the values and customs of the Naga culture. The British saw the Nagas as continuously harassing them and were therefore construed as savage and uncivilized. However, for the Nagas, it was a matter of survival and the retention of their territory and independence. The Khasis of Meghalaya were also perceived as “pagans” and “barbarians” by the conquering British (Talukdar 2). In a similar manner, the tribals of mainland India have also been given names which differ according to their religious beliefs and geographical location. The term *Jana* has been used by Buddhists, Puranic and secular literature of medieval period to designate many of the communities which are referred to as tribes (Bagchi). Some tribes have also been designated as aboriginal (Risfey), primitive tribe (Huttom) and true aboriginal communities (Risfey). Terms like *Vir Adivasi* (first settlers or autochthonous), *Bhumi- Putra* (son of the soil), *Adimjati* (original community), *Vanjati or*

*Vanyajati* (caste of forest), *Upjati or Girijan Vanjati* (dwellers of forest) and *Pahari* (hill dwellers) have also been used to denote the different tribal people living in India (Sahu 7).

Likewise, the people from different regions of North-east India were often misunderstood and not much effort was made to understand or identify them as individuals or cultural groups by the British. Like many British officers, later anthropologists of independent India assumed that the tribes of North-east India were isolated categories. This assumption does not take into account the varying histories, belief systems, traditional practices and languages of the different tribes inhabiting the region. To blend all the people together in one homogenized group suited the political objectives of the British and so, the people were continuously denied separate cultural and ethnic identities. Today, the people of North-east are still in the same predicament as this kind of mindset continues to permeate the thinking of the more dominant cultures of mainland India.

Prior to the colonial era the use of a generic term to describe tribal peoples was absent. The term “tribe” came to be acquired during the colonial and post-colonial period (Xaxa 1363). The use of the term “tribe” to describe people who were different from mainstream civilization is seen as a colonial construct. The use of the categorization “tribe” to describe “people so heterogeneous from each other in respect of physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, or stages of social formation and level of acculturation and development was put forward by the colonial administration” (ibid).

This chapter will attempt to show how various counter-voices on identity have been manifested in selected poems from North-east India. A marginalized and peripheral region in terms of its geographical location, population, religion and cultural practices, the entire North-east region has often been mistakenly homogenized as a single entity and projected as the Other

as well as vice versa. In the Introduction to *Construction of Evil in North East India: Myth, Narrative and Discourse* (2012), Prasenjit Biswas and C. Joshua Thomas write:

The idea of the North East conceived as a frontier space, right through the colonial to the postcolonial served the purpose of state-building in terms of a ‘differentiated, describable and enumerable’ populace inhabiting ‘non-state’ spaces in the hills that lacked the presence of modern forms of biopower .... This ‘monochromatic’ and ‘ocular’ space gave rise to a sense of ethnic and cultural ‘Othering’ that grew out of a nascent Indian self expelling its anxieties, contradictions and irrationalities onto the subalterns in the periphery in terms of being ‘suspects’ without any authentic sense of belonging. At times of crisis such as the immediate after-effects of partition, such an Othering of the North East was violently reversed by these peoples by an assumption of agency that can react and contest through an inherent conflictual circumstance. The very characterization of political and social space of the North East in the nationalist parlance turned out to be an act of exteriorization or Othering, which got transfigured and transgressed into a vengeance for the Other in the North East. This Cartesian division between a national Self and an Other not only remained confined between the dominant and the subordinate, but it got replicated within the North East in terms of dominant and non-dominant Others.

(xvii)

The idea of projecting people from the region as “subaltern” from a “non-state” is obviously unacceptable to those from the region and this is evident in the poem of Yumlam Tana from Arunachal Pradesh who tellingly writes in his poem “The Kurta and the Pyjama” :

You see, I am a *Nyishi*

A tribal claiming to be a man.



(*Nyishi* literally means sons of *niya* or man)

In his essay “J. H. Hutton and the North-East,” P.K. Misra opines that colonialism was the cause of the “large-scale decimation of the indigenous populations the world over, their displacement, their pauperization and the creation in them of a deep sense of inferiority” (33). Though this has no doubt been the case with most tribal communities of the region in the past, it is a different story today thanks to the advent of education and modernization and of late, globalization as well. In the same poem quoted above, the poet draws our attention to the several changes that have been brought about by the arrival of people from beyond their boundaries. Their traditional clothes have been replaced by the *kurta* and the *pyjama* which were introduced to them by people from the plains. Wearing clothes other than one’s ethnic costume may be seen in some ways as a dilution of one’s ethnic identity but the poet does not appear to be concerned about this. What he instead emphasizes is all encompassing humanity which has no geographical boundary :

No social restrictions, no biological limitations

... Nothing to divide me from my fellow men.

One can detect an act of subversion here in the seeming docile acceptance of changes from outside, but the fact really is that the poet has transcended narrow divisions and considerations and yet has not lost his identity as a *Nyishi* tribal from Arunachal.

Cherrie L. Chhangte, a poet from Mizoram counters identity stereotypes imposed on her by others that fail to recognize her individuality. In her poem “Plea” she writes:

Demythologize me,

I would rather be a person

Than a representative of my tribe;

Individualistic and selfish

With personal quirks,

But also personal needs.

Here a parallel may be drawn with the Aborigines of Australia who had been evicted from their traditional lands by the white Australians. M.C. Lalthazuali writes in her essay “Reclaiming Identity: Narratives by Sally Morgan and Jane Harrison” that the Aboriginal writers of Australia have “started to redefine themselves and are trying to break the stereotypes constructed by the white Australians” (191). Though the tribal communities from North-east India may not have the same history as the Aborigines, they do share the same burden of discrimination as members of minority communities who are often misrepresented and misunderstood.

People from the North-east often encounter questions about their origins and nationalities from their fellow Indians which unfortunately contribute to the alienation factor suffered. Today after sixty odd years of independence as a nation, people from the region are in no doubt about the fact that they are part of the Indian nation, willingly or otherwise. Chhange admits to her identity as an Indian in her poem “What does an Indian Look Like.” Disturbed by the harried assumptions that are made about her as a woman from the hills, she writes:

You look at me, and you see

My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith.

You dissect my past, analyse my present

Predict my future and build my profile.

I am a curiosity, an ‘ethnic’ specimen.

The lack of knowledge about the people belonging to North-east India often results in their being misunderstood and even in a reluctance to acknowledge them as Indians. It is a fact that due to different histories and racial origins, the physical features of most people from North-east India differ greatly from those of the plains. Though there is no determinant physical appearance to describe what an Indian is to look like, yet dominant communities from mainland India have difficulty in accepting people whom they see as different in appearance and cultural practices. Chhangte pointedly asks a question to which she herself provides the answer :

‘What does an Indian look like?

----An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me.

Paul Lyngdoh, a native of Meghalaya, bemoans the loss of traditional values which were once an intrinsic part of the Khasi culture. In his poem “For sale” he exposes the debased condition of the people of his land with a satiric tone that is meant to ridicule. He holds responsible the greed of both his own people as well as that of the outsider for loss in terms of the material as well as traditional values that impact one’s identity. He draws up a list of all that have been sacrificed and will continue to be lost :

For sale

this battered, autistic land with its lucre-laden earth,

our precious minerals, medicinal herbs, rare orchids,

and trees and fields and waters,

all these, and all else.

In Introduction to *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih write that a “strong rootedness” is to be seen everywhere in the writings of the region. The “roots of the beloved land; the roots of the people’s culture; the roots of the times; and most of all, the roots of the past” are an inherent part of their poems giving it a “unique savour” (xii). This sense of rootedness is also conspicuous in Lyngdoh’s poem which indicates that his people do not make sufficient endeavors to preserve their land with its rich natural resources. Lyngdoh is keenly aware that his land gives him an identity and a sense of belonging, and therefore wishes to nurture an ecological awareness as well.

In the same poem, he writes:

For sale

our cumbersome anachronistic tribal roots

that have thrown a spanner in our wheels of progress,

in our march away from our own,

and have become a constant source of embarrassment.

Foreign influences brought about by colonialism, Christianization and globalization has resulted in the loss of indigenous identity. Many indigenous customs and traditions are pressurized and therefore diluted, by foreign values and teachings. In keeping with the satiric tone that he maintains throughout the poem, he calls his tribal roots “cumbersome” and “anachronistic”.

He goes on to write:

For sale

our pride, values, work culture,  
 our sense of shame, our collective conscience.

These lines serve to further fortify his assertion that the values of his people have been compromised and undergone tremendous changes after their exposure to outsiders. Many qualities which were once intrinsic in shaping the identity of the people of Meghalaya are now abandoned. V. Bijukumar in his essay “Social Exclusion and Ethnicity in Northeast India,” writes that the “assertion of various ethnic identities and the attitude of the state in containing ethnic extremism make the region distinct from the rest of India” (24). He also writes that the root cause of “ethnic assertion can be found in the identity crisis of various tribal communities who extend over the territorial boundaries drawn by the Indian nation state” (ibid). Bijukumar also opines that the assertion of identity can be seen in two contexts; firstly, the tribal communities’ subjective consciousness of being excluded oppressed and marginalized (ibid). Secondly, the process of development failed to address the legitimate concerns of the people, hence producing notions of neglect in the minds of the locals (ibid). Taking such views into perspective, it is not surprising that the poets of North-east India have taken pains to assert their identity and counter the forces that bring about a loss or dilution of identity, be it internal or otherwise.

One crucial way to emphasize one’s identity not just as a member of a homogenized group but also as an individual is through the assertion of one’s identity. Kynpham S. Nongkynrih in his poem “Self-actualization” attempts to achieve this. He writes of his quest to understand himself and identifies himself as many things some of which are as follow:

A son of crab /An abusive husband /A devoted husband /A wicked neighbor /A felonious councillor /A guilty bystander /A bad relation / An ‘evil’ administrator / A Vice-Chancellor’s chamcha / A counterfeit scholar / A small-time poet

Nongkynrih, in his inimitable way wherein he spares no one, least of all himself, has taken up the task of defining himself through his own perception of himself and not through the eyes of an outsider. In the same poem, he makes his desire to establish his identity apparent. He describes himself thus:

A recalcitrant Indian, since I am buried  
too deep in my tribal roots and refuse to be  
swept away by the Main Stream.

He makes it clear that he is resisting outside influences in an effort to retain his tribal identity. He also acknowledges the presence of a mainstream culture in India which invariably marginalizes the minority cultures. A commonality between Nongkynrih, a Khasi poet and Chhangte, a Mizo poet can be found here. Chhangte too acknowledges the irony that India is professed to be a land of diversity and yet, it has “little rivulets and brooks/ Furiously trying to keep pace with the river”. These lines reflect that a perfect harmony between all the people of India is still a dream as the minority cultures are still struggling, without much success it appears, to fit into the world of the larger majority.

In “Self-actualization,” Nongkynrih, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, also calls himself a “retrograde” as he wants “trees on the hills, birds in the woods, fishes in the streams.” He also writes that he is a “heathen” since he believes in “sacred groves”. Sacred groves are forests believed to be the abode of deities in the indigenous faith of the people of Meghalaya. The

welfare of people, cattle and land depends largely on the adherence to traditional norms of the sacred groves, failure of which may result in the wrath of the deities or the appearance of evil spirits. Nongkynrih's poetry, like many other poems from North-east India is marked by a "unique presence of nature whether in the form of a simple backdrop scenery but more often as spirits and souls, playing an active role in the artistic creation" (Anupama 59). An important reason for this is the close relationship the people of North-east India shared with nature prior to their exposure to foreign religions. Nature is not just a means of sustenance but as Anupama writes, it is also "an extension of identity and roots" (60). He continues that "to harm nature immediately affects the question of identity" because nature "becomes a space where an individual identifies himself" (ibid). Thus, the celebration of nature becomes an important and significant manner of re-asserting one's identity for poets from North-east India. The final lines of the poem declare:

I shall describe myself as that supreme diplomat:

‘I am who I am’ and that is the ultimate enigma.

Nongkynrih, through these lines, defies all stereotypes and the imposition of an identity on him by other people. By describing himself in his own words, as he sees himself, he presents a counter-voice which resists the references to stereotypes usually made about people of the region by outsiders.

Nongkynrih also reacts to colonialism and its varying consequences in his poem titled "Only Strange Flowers Have Come to Bloom". In this poem, he writes,

Since David Scott, they have come

a long way, these pears supplanting

the natives everywhere.

In this poem he draws an analogy between the pear fruits and the indigenous natives of Khasi land. Pears were first brought to the Khasi Hills by David Scott, a British adventurer who came to the region during the British Raj, Nongkynrih expresses his concern over the foreign fruits superseding the natives of the Khasi Hills. He continues:

And charming, when spring returns,  
 their youthful forms, their blossoms  
 giving us such a sweet look.

In winter they seem starved  
 and stand despairing in the cold  
 having worked out their own misery.

Like them we shed our old ways  
 and having shed them we find  
 no spring to bring the flowers back.

These lines reflect the loss of traditional values and customs among the people of the Khasi Hills. Nongkynrih cries out that the old ways his people have “shed” have not been revived or brought back. He ponders over what could happen to his people if they continue to be easily influenced by foreign cultures and questions:

For how long can we go on  
 living like wind-blown thistle downs?



He realizes that his people are easily influenced by foreign influences and compares them to thistle downs which are can be easily blown in different directions by the wind. He further illustrates the influx of alien cultures in his last two paragraphs which say:

In the park I saw  
 those strange flowers again  
 that I have seen bossing around  
 courtyards and private gardens.

Like flowers, only strangers  
 and strange ways have come  
 to bloom in this land.

In “Identification Marks,” Nongkynrih also addresses the issue of identity. In this ruminative poem, he makes a scathing remark on the identity of a Khasi in a tone that is strikingly honest, brutal and yet poignant. In the poem, he responds to a question that asks how a Khasi can be spotted or identified:

Not by his mother tongue since  
 too many mothers and fathers  
 have rendered his tongue truly macaronic,  
 his features truly olla podrida.

Not by his dress since  
 he is truly universal.

Not by churches or temples since

he doesn't have any.

Not by his religion since

they would simply label him 'non-Christian'.

Not anymore as a 'red-mouthed demon' since

betel nut stain has afflicted everyone.

Not by his *syiems* since

they rule like commission agents

and serve at the pleasure of scoundrels.

Not by his leaders since

they are the scoundrels.

(*Syiems* are the Khasi traditional rulers)

These lines expose the dilution of the qualities or characteristics that once marked a Khasi and gave him a unique identity. The Khasi language has gone through a transformation which has made it a mixture of foreign and local words. The physical features or the appearance of a Khasi today does not show much distinction from those of other people as the rampant inter-marriages with outsiders have resulted in the metamorphosis of the physical appearance of the people. Even the attire worn by Khasis no longer distinguishes them as Khasis because they have adopted foreign dress codes and apparels that are markedly different from their traditional attires. Nongkynrih also gives an indication that the indigenous belief systems of his people are inconspicuous and do not suffice to identity a person. This is because only established religions enjoy a position of prominence. A person conforming to indigenous belief systems is just a 'non-Christian' and nothing more.

Nongkynrih, in this poem also calls our attention to the tragic truth that the danger faced by their cultural identity is not just from outside influences but also by forces that appear insidiously from within. The *syiems* or the Khasi traditional rulers fail to utilize their power or status for the strengthening of their cultural identity. They also fail to bring about progress that can better the lives of the Khasis because in their selfishness and greed, they have lavished themselves with wealth and power. In the process they have neglected the welfare of their own people.

Nongkynrih is vocal and honest in his tirade which is directed at his own people who are complicit in the dilution of their own culture:

A Khasi is a man, who once a year,

sports a *muka*-mulberry turban,

an *eri* shawl and is seen en grande tenue

at *Weiking* or *Pomblang*.

Who once a year, speaks of these great festivals

and the teachings of his great ancestors.

Who once a year, says

‘to Know Man-to Know God,

to know Maternal-Paternal Relations,

to Earn Righteousness’ is our faith.

But this, only once a year.

(*Muka*-mulberry is a type of silk; *Pomblang* is a Khasi religio-cultural dance festivals in spring and winter)

These lines reflect what a Khasi has become according to Nongkynrih. The Khasis remember or make the effort to adhere to their cultural practices and customs only once a year during the festival of *Pomblang*. Nongkynrih's counter-voice on the hybrid nature of his people is in most cases, angry and direct. His counter-voice is at times subtle while an explicit bluntness is also found in his poems.

The issue of identity also finds a place in the poems of Robin S Ngangom, a Manipuri poet living in Meghalaya. In his poem titled "Poem for Joseph" he deplores:

"It is never too late to come home."

But I need a homeland

Where I can recognize myself,

just a map or even a tree or a stone,

to mark a spot I could return to

like an animal

even when there's nothing to return for.

These lines reflect the dilemma of a man who feels uprooted and displaced because he is living in exile from the land he was born and raised in. Though the poem is addressed to someone other than himself, the poet in many ways appears to identify himself and his own circumstances, with that of the man Joseph. Though the exile is self-imposed in the case of both the poet and the addressed, a sense of alienation is evident when he talks of his homeland. He longs for a place that will offer security and a sense of belonging. Living in Meghalaya exposes certain realities – victimization as an unwanted outsider by extremists groups, and Ngangom feels a sense of insecurity as he neither fully belongs to his native land nor to his adopted one.

His poem “Everywhere I go” contains deep pathos about the destruction and loss of pride in selfhood, shared surely by equally sensitive minds:

Everywhere I go

I carry my homeland with me.

I look for it in protest marches on the streets of the capital,

in dark-maned girls of beauty contests

forced to waiting now behind windows.

I harbour the wretchedness of those youths

who do not wish to return

but would rather serve in a city’s sordid restaurants

because devils and thieves rule their home.

He introduces his homeland as it is usually portrayed by the media and is generally acknowledged to be by outsiders. He mentions that protests remind him of his land as Manipur is often in the news for its violent civilian protests. He also admits that the youths of Manipur prefer to live a life of servitude outside their state because they believe it is a better life in contrast to the one they would have to live in their hometowns ruled by “devils and thieves.” Though the poet continues to project hardships faced by his people, the last paragraph of his poem celebrates his homeland:

But whenever I touch my homeland’s streets

Everyone seems happy and have no grouses.

I must stop agonizing and save what I can

Such as the tunes of my homeland

Which dance in my blood.

These lines are vivid with their attempts to assert that there is more to Manipur than what is generally known and acknowledged by the people. Though it is portrayed as a land of endless conflict and corruption and violence, the people of Manipur invent their own means of survival and happiness in their land. The poet also admits that it would do more good for his people if he celebrates his homeland and make efforts to preserve its cultural identity through his writings than to agonize over what is happening.

He is more outspoken in his poem “To Alun Lewis, Soldier, Poet” where he exclaims:

You being a Britisher

it is difficult to love you.

Ngangom shows, in this poem, his intense awareness that British colonialism had its toll on his homeland. He admonishes the dead soldier who is also a poet, for coming to the “far-flung hills”, and yet also laments the death of Alun Lewis on March 5, 1944 in the Arakan Hills. Ngangom clearly wishes that the soldier poet had stayed home and not come to India where he eventually met his death. However, he also shows his partiality for a fellow poet as he ends his poem with the lines:

Being a poet I salute you brother.

They still say poets will not fight.

Most of the tribes of North-east India do not have written literature that records their history before the arrival of outsiders. Mamang Dai points this out in her poem “The Missing Link” where she instead emphasizes upon the significance of nature in their history:

There are no records.

The river was the green  
and white vein of our lives

In her poem “Birthplace” too, she validates the role of nature in the origin of her people and in doing so, staking claim to an identity of their own making:

We are the children of the rain  
of the cloud woman,  
brother to the stone and bat  
in our cradle of bamboo and vine  
in our long houses we slept,  
and when morning came  
we were refreshed.

The Ao-Nagas too have an origin myth according to which their first forefathers emerged out of the earth at the place called Lungterok. Lungterok literally means Six Stones - there were three men and three women. Some of the stones are still to be found below a village called Chungliyimti in Nagaland. Ao’s attempt to revive lost history is evident in her poem “Stone-people from Lungterok” which, as the title suggests, alludes to the origin myth of the Ao-Nagas which again, like Dai, is a reiteration of selfhood and an identity quite unique and different.

Lungterok,  
The six stones  
Where the progenitors  
And forebears  
Of the stone-people

Were born

Out of the womb

Of the earth.

As the poem progresses, Ao gives the “stone-people” identities which reflect their inherent characteristics and nature. She calls them “The poetic and politic/ Barbaric and Balladic/ Finders of water/ And fighters of fire” and mentions that they are “polyglots/ Knowledgeable In birds’ language/ And animal discourse”. In the same poem, she also claims that the “stone-people” are “students/ Who learned from ants/ The art of carving/ Heads of enemies/ As trophies/ Of war. GJV Prasad writes that Temsula Ao:

... searches for the past that has disappeared into the mists of time, for it is in the very unrealisability of that history that her people’s troubled present arises; the disjunctions and dislocations in their past (perfect or otherwise) have given rise to their mistranslated and tense present. So, the translated Naga writer searches for the original – the poet knowing fully well that the original can never be found except in unexpected and transient epiphanies that can never be built on. However, it is a necessary task and the story teller’s role is of great significance for there is no other way to resurrect lost history, for reinforcing cultural markers, to instill pride in community identity, even if there can be no return to it, no action replay, even if parts of that legacy are to be critiqued and understood only historically. (xiv)

Such are some of the counter-voices found in the poems of poets from North-east India, poetry that seek to expound on issues of identity. The selected poets and poems have either resisted, or transcended the constructed identities that have been imposed upon them by outsiders. They have resisted in varying ways - sometimes by re-asserting their individual and



cultural identity, while sometimes the resistances are found in the strident voices that narrate their plight as members of a minority group that is exploited, sidelined and neglected. Yet some poems have taken to celebrating their indigenous culture through imageries related to nature, or to the purity of their cultural values, in attempts to subvert and resist the notion that the foreign influences are superior to their indigenous practices. Angry and honest voices raised in an introspective tirade against themselves, the insiders are also found. These poets represent “people whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process from the past to the future” (Misra xvii).

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## COUNTER-VOICES OF WOMEN

This chapter will examine how women poets from North-east India have raised their voices to counter the various forms of oppression they have had to submit themselves to, through a study of selected poems. In many different societies, women have been “relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination” (Ashcroft et al. 233). In a way, women may be equated to colonized races and cultures with whom they share “an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and suppression” (ibid). Women of formerly colonized regions are often said to be “doubly colonized”. Double colonization is the notion that women in formerly colonized societies were “doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies” (ibid). They have suffered more than their men folk have; under a dominant alien culture and a rigid patriarchal system within their own communities. Women have been bound by conventional roles expected to be performed by women, roles which have more or less confined her to the household. This has left her with almost no opportunity to explore her individuality. In spite of all the many hindrances a woman has had to face, she has nonetheless striven to find herself a voice in which to assert herself. Since North-east India is a conflict ridden region, the “spaces” of women “become restricted and their mobility severely hampered” and very often “women’s bodies become the site of battle with innumerable instances of atrocities and brutality” (Gill 11,12). This chapter will be a reflection of what women have been subjected to, and how they have tried to subvert the established ideas within their own cultural ethos of what a woman is.

Postcolonial feminist criticism will be referred to at certain sections of this chapter. The comprehensive and variable nature of postcolonial feminist criticism allows it to enclose many aspects of studies related to women within its ambit. According to John McLeod, the analyses of

postcolonial feminist criticism range across the “representations of women in once-colonized countries and in Western locations” (172). He also writes, “Some critics have concentrated on the constructions of gender difference during the colonial period, in both colonial and anti-colonial discourses; while others have concerned themselves with the representations of women in postcolonial discourses, with particular reference to the work of women writers” (ibid). To have a better understanding of postcolonial feminist criticism, an understanding of the term “patriarchy” is necessary. McLeod defines patriarchy as “those systems – political, material and imaginative – which invest power in men and marginalize women” (173). He further adds that patriarchy, like colonialism “manifests itself in both concrete ways (such as disqualifying women a vote) and at the level of imagination. It asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as ‘normal’ or ‘true’”. Jasbir Jain also writes that patriarchy, at the outset, stands for “power and authority” (13). According to him, patriarchy symbolizes “possession, control and belonging” (ibid). Patriarchy can find its parallel in colonialism as both exist in the midst of resistances to its authority. Both feminism and postcolonialism share “the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression” (McLeod 174).

Women poets like Temsula Ao and Monalisa Changkija from Nagaland and Esther Syiem from Meghalaya have attempted, through their selected poetry, to challenge the different forms of oppressions women have had to submit themselves to. Many of their poems may be read as their counter voices against patriarchy and their endeavors to inform their readers of the rights of women. By voicing the experiences and sufferings of women, they offer a resistance by strongly implying that women should not have to be so subservient or subjected to male domination. In “Temsula Ao: An Introduction,” GJV Prasad writes that Temsula Ao “has no great sympathy for the traditional view of women” (xx). This observation has been justly made

as a study of her works suggests. In fact, her poems are manifestations of her sympathy for the cause of women in a patriarchal society that still adheres to many traditional views on women, particularly from her stance as an Ao-Naga woman.

In her essay “Benevolent Subordination,” Ao writes that in the patriarchal Naga society, “women have always been subordinate to men” and that Naga society “existed on the strength of male superiority and male prerogatives” for centuries (125). She also adds that all landed property traditionally belonged to the male and if a man has only daughters, his property reverts to his male siblings and their sons on his deathbed. When education was introduced by the western missionaries, it was the male child who got the first opportunity and a female child, if allowed to go to school, was taken out as soon as she could read the Bible and the songsheet as they were required to help their parents in farm work to support their brothers studying in towns. The lot of women did not change much with the acceptance of the new religion, Christianity. The Pastor who heads the church is a male, and so are the Deacon Boards who make important decisions for the church. A woman can only become an Associate Pastor in the Baptist church she was associated with, clearly indicating the power structure even within the church (127).

Though Naga women of today are mostly well-educated and actively participating in economic activities, they “suffer from remnants of this psychological ‘trauma’ of subordination, which in their grandmothers’ times might have seemed perfectly logical but which now appears to be a paradox within the ‘modern, educated’ self (ibid 130). This explains, to a great extent, why Nagaland has had no female Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) till date though women in the Naga society are “increasingly exposed to modern ideas and concepts due to factors like contemporary education, media and technology, the globalization process, and westernization associated with Christianity” (Koza).

Keeping the lot of the Naga women in mind, this study will now move into a more detailed study of Ao's poem which has been selected for its vivid and honest portrayal of her views. The various ways in which Ao offers her resistance and her counter-voice on the treatment meted out to women will be highlighted. In her poem titled "Woman" Ao writes of the plight of women, and expresses her disdain at being considered the weaker sex who must live a life of submission. Her first line opens "Nature fashioned her thus" suggesting that nature plays a role in shaping women to be the way they are. She continues saying that a woman is fashioned:

To bear the burden

To hold the seed

And feed

Every other need

But hers.

These lines are replete with anguish at the expectations, even by nature, from women. Though it is a biological necessity for a woman to carry a "seed," the idea that a woman has to feed and take care of all the needs of everyone else around her poses to be cumbersome and a burden. In most households, a woman is expected to carry out all household chores, leaving her little or no time to tend to her own personal needs. Ao continues to articulate her concerns in the next few lines as she proceeds:

Time perpetuated her assignment

And custom prevailed

Even when she cried and wailed

In protest.



As these lines imply, Ao wishes to point out that as time passes, her duties were perpetuated into a habitual duty she is forced to become accustomed to. In spite of her protests at the unjust treatment meted out to her, she cannot win against “custom” or what has been traditionally accepted. Ao further contemplates:

Man beguiled her  
 Into submission  
 Thus establishing  
 Timeless dominion  
 While he forayed and strayed.

Man charms and captivates woman into being compliant and giving in to his demands. He thus succeeds in establishing dominance over her, a dominance that knows no end. Meanwhile, he ransacks her of her individuality and freedom and then drifts away from her to come and go as he pleases. A woman, however, is expected to remain loyal and faithful to her duties and to her man. This disequilibrium between man and woman leaves no space for a woman to protest, and strive to discover and indulge herself. Ao resumes her verbalization as she continues:

Religion sanctified  
 Dogma petrified  
 The convenient mould  
 Of mother, lover  
 And beast of burden.

Ao is well aware of the social factors responsible for confining women to their current standing in the household and in the society. She blatantly states that “religion” is responsible for the subservient condition of women. Religion and its teachings sanctify or justify the way women are treated. When a man behaves according to what he believes is being taught by the religion he follows, it is an arduous task to challenge his pre-conceived notions about the role women are expected to play in the society. The religious doctrine that are being propagated also rigidify the existing ideas about women and men, making it a daunting task to even protest against them. Ao’s anguish at the predicament of women is conspicuous as she sees her in the form of a “convenient mould” evoking the image of a woman whose value is only justified in her existence for others. A woman serves as a mother and as a lover too as and when the situation demands of her. But the disheartening reality is that a woman is, above all, a “beast of burden” that sees no end to the numerous demands made of her.

But the woman who is designed to be oppressed, beguiled and betrayed sometimes finds it in herself to rebel and resist the power that is wielded over her. She attempts to destroy the “convenient mould” she has come to associate herself with and tries to free herself from the grip that nature has contrived to limit her.

But woman,

Thus fashioned

Thus oppressed

Beguiled and betrayed,

Sometimes rebelled

To break the mound

And shake off the hold

That nature devised

And man improvised.

Though man comes up with schemes to subjugate women, a time eventually comes when she in turn starts to defy man and man-made customs, at times with deviant behavior. Ao then continues to name “such deviates”, women in history and mythology to indicate that women too have the capability to prove themselves to the world.

Boadicea and Godiva

Clytemnestra and Cleopatra

Medea and Borgia

And etcetera . . .

The women named by Ao are powerful women, who during their times challenged the cultural and societal constructs regarding women and their roles. Boadicea was a warrior queen of the Brittonic tribe called Iceni. She eventually died in AD 60 in a battle against the Romans. She is remembered as a courageous woman who fought to defend her country against the powerful Roman Empire. Lady Godiva (c. 1040-1080) was the wife of an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who through her persistent requests convinced her husband to lower the taxes he levied on his people. Her husband challenged her to ride naked on horseback across town and would comply to her requests only if she did so. Her husband kept his word after she rode naked. In Greek mythology, Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon. She had a lover while her husband was away at war. Upon his return, she and her lover killed her husband partly to avenge the death of her daughter at the hands of Agamemnon and partly because of her adulterous relationship. Cleopatra (BC 69-30) was an Egyptian queen who ruled ancient Egypt as co-regent

for about twenty two years. Well-educated and clever, she could speak multiple languages and survived as a queen in a male-dominated society. Medea, according to Greek mythology, was an enchantress who conspired against her own father, brother and many other people with her husband Jason, the leader of the Argonauts. When Jason deserted her for another woman, Medea took revenge by murdering her two sons by Jason, the woman he deserted her for as well as her father. She took refuge with and also married Aegues who later drove her away after her failed attempt to murder his son. Medea is remembered till today for her unconventional characteristics. Borgia was a member of the scandalous and prominent Borgia family of fifteenth century Italy. Rumors of an incestuous relationship and her attendance of an orgy which involved fifty prostitutes and some clergymen surround her. She is also believed to have been married three times, all of which were a result of the political aspirations of her family.

It is more often than not that a woman requires a role-model to look up to as she attempts to challenge traditional views as it can be a daunting and challenging task. The women mentioned above have all transcended the boundaries set for women during their times. They explored their individual traits and exerted the little power allowed to them and eventually surpassing the expectations the contemporary society had from women.

In her essay “Folklore, Folk Ideas and Gender among the Nagas” Anungla Aier suggests that the differentiations in the male and female situation in the society as well as the notions of masculinity or femininity are “shaped and constructed by the society” rather than being “pre-determined or natural” (302). She explains that the cross-cultural studies of these differences show that they differ in every society and asserts that men and women occupy “a different social space that defines their identity and social roles within the household or in the community” (ibid). She goes on to state that the Naga society is a “patriarchal, patrilineal society where the

structure of the relationship between the genders normally gets the legal sanction through institutions such as the customary law” ( ibid 303). Again, the male-centric view of human life as observed by Jain, has “spilled over into all areas of life: myth and culture, religious practices, physical geography, philosophical and epistemological quests and frameworks, socio-economic constructs, history and art, and above all language - the tool with which we think and communicate” (15). Jain further adds that the basic challenge remains one of making a break through this web of preconceived notions that is discriminatory towards women and favorable towards men.

Such a challenge naturally falls into hands of women and many women have also fought to break free from such preconceived notions about the role women are expected to play. Just as Ao’s poems voice her challenge, Monalisa Changkija, a noted poet from Nagaland also deals with the issue of patriarchy and its oppressive ways in many of her poems. In one of her untitled poems, she writes,

I see it nowhere written  
 that your unironed shirts  
 deserve my attention  
 more than my flying lessons.

These lines are honest in their attempt to subvert the notion that a woman must give up her own needs and dreams so that a man’s needs can be taken care of by her. The poem opens with an insolent tone that asserts, “I see it nowhere written.” Though canonical literature and many religious texts suggest that a woman must be subservient to man, Changkija does not acknowledge them and claims it is not a written law for a woman to serve man. The mention of a very menial and domestic chore such as ironing the shirt of a man further goes to strengthen her

point that all domestic chores do not necessarily have to be in the hands of a woman. The third and fourth line of her poem goes on to enforce her standpoint. She insists that her attention should also be placed in the direction of her own dreams and desires. Her talking about taking a flying lesson is also crucial when one remembers that flying is essentially deemed a man's preoccupation and not a woman's. That a woman should want to take flying lessons, a task that is considered very masculine, tells of her desire to see women play a role in all aspects of life and not limit themselves to just those that are conventionally believed to be fit only for women.

Changkija also lays a lot of emphasis on the physical violence that women are often subjected to and many of her poems deal with this social evil. Vidya Bal, Women's Activist and Journalist writes in her essay "Re-defining Feminism" of the existing notion that violence against women does not happen in urban middle class families and that the problem of violence belongs to slums and rural life. She dismisses this belief and asserts that violence against women is a "secular, egalitarian phenomenon that exists cutting across all sections, castes, classes and religions in the society!" (4). Changkija takes no precaution to conceal the truth as she bluntly opines:

Masculine hands  
 raining blows  
 on bodies  
 soft and feminine  
 to me,  
 are battles lost  
 but not

wars won.

This poem deals with the issue of domestic violence which is rampant in many homes. Many husbands or male figures take out their frustrations on women physically. This happens to the extent that it is considered natural and even necessary by many. Changkija, in her typical honest manner, expresses that such actions against women are “battles lost.” She asserts that when a man maltreats a woman, and touches her in an attempt to hurt her, he has no gain. He has lost his battle and has not won any war either. Her belief that physical abuse of women is a humiliating action is evident from her lines. She further expounds upon the plight of women who are subjected to such maltreatments:

In bodies battered, bruised and bent

live unbroken spirits,

Children call them, “Mother”

Society defines them, “Wives”.

The above lines convey Changkija’s desire to accord to women the honor that is repeatedly denied to them. In spite of their repeated subjection to violence as a result of which their bodies are “battered, bruised and bent,” their spirits remain “unbroken” and they go on living their lives with a determination and strength that is miraculous. However, the abuse they are subjected to have their consequences as Changkija writes:

Violence-induced miscarriages,

black-eyes and bloodied-lips

blue-bruises and broken ribs

within the sanctity of marriages

and security of homes,  
are unrecorded indexes  
of man's "progress and growth"  
on this planet's unwritten  
Pages of Pain.

Miscarriages or the loss of the innocent fetuses as a result of the cruel actions of men on women are common incidents. The poem talks about the miscarriages, black-eyes, bloodied lips, blue-bruises and broken ribs that are inflicted on women. She discloses that these things happen "within the sanctity of marriages" - a marriage which is supposed to be a sacred vow made by two people before God in the presence of family and friends. Such a marriage sanctified by religion is overlooked or ignored by many men. A woman yearns for security and protection from her husband but many husbands fail to provide her this. Instead of protecting her, he becomes her tormentor and the source of her pain. While a home is supposed to be a safe and secure place, abused women cannot enjoy this comfort due to the tyranny of an abusive husband. Meanwhile, men are accorded with many material successes and accomplishments. Civilization supposedly denotes growth and progress but women still face the same humiliation and barbaric treatment that their ancestors had faced in the past many centuries. The condition of women has not seen much progress though man has progressed in many other aspects of life. Changkija also uses the term "unwritten" to refer to the continuing sufferings and pain of women who are denied the freedom and the opportunity to make their voices heard. So, the sufferings continue but are unheard and untold. Yet, the trauma that women undergo as a result of physical violence cannot be denied. In her essay "Re-defining Feminism," Vidya Bal writes,



“Violence is not just physical, it is psychological as well. In fact, psychological violence is not seen and cannot be shown or proven easily. Not only is it invisible, it has its wounds far deeper and at times beyond healing!” (4)

Changkija continues to talk about what is behind a “battered wife” or a woman repeatedly exposed to violence:

A battered wife  
is a living testament  
of man’s inability  
and fear of inferiority,  
well-concealed by a  
mask of “masculinity”  
in a patriarchal society.

She asserts that a woman subjected to physical and mental pain is a result of man’s frustration and “fear of inferiority”. These lines strongly suggest her view that a man is not always capable and efficient as popularly constructed by society. Throughout history, men have been placed on a pedestal and looked upon as the superior sex that is capable, respectable and deserving of authority. But many women have proved themselves to be equally competent in many aspects. This gives rise to the fear in men, of their positions being subverted by women. Changkija goes on to assert that this fear is very “well-concealed”. Men are able to hide under the guise of masculinity while actually being afraid that their dominance could be taken away from them. Changkija condemns a “patriarchal” society that sets no limit on how far a man is allowed to go to assert his masculinity. If a man strikes his wife, it is taken as a given that a man

is allowed to do so because he is a man. So many allowances are made by society for the inhumane treatment that is meted out to women because they are deemed the weaker sex who must be subservient. In many cases, it is both the patriarchy and the individual that are to be blamed. Changkija does not think she will be able to live the life of oppression and violence that she depicts in her poem:

Walking alone  
through the  
passage of time  
and falling into  
the abyss of  
the irredeemable  
would be paradise,  
than living in  
“sacred matrimony”  
with anyone  
who sees no  
difference between  
animals, servants  
and wives.

In this hauntingly sad poem, Changkija voices the plight of women with brutal honesty. The poem talks about how a life of solitude would be paradise compared to a life of marriage with a man who would treat her no differently than an animal or a servant. The notion that a man

can see no difference between a wife and an animal or a servant is an honest observation as many men expect their wives to work and maintain the household as though they were created for such roles only. They lack the freedom to pursue activities that interest them, and are often treated like they have no feelings. Changkija believes that she would not be able to spend such a kind of life with a man, and would rather be alone and even be considered irredeemable by others who do not approve of her way of life. Changkija also talks about breaking free from the clutches of man and conventions in her poems. In one of her poems which she titles “To Whom It May Concern,” Changkija seems to realize that backing out from a relationship that does not make one happy is a viable option. The poem makes scathing remarks about the toll the relationship she shares with the addressee has on her well-being and happiness. She takes no precautions to soften the words as she bluntly speaks out:

This is not an offering of apologies,  
for what you perceive a changed me.

This is merely for you to know  
my motion and mobility;  
body, heart and soul  
are no longer free  
for you to dictate and monitor.

These lines reveal the authority men tend to assume over women. Such an authority is seen at the level of two individuals in a relationship, as well as in a collective manner in which male members of a society tend to assume, over female members. Changkija states that she has resumed control over her “body, heart and soul” and that she is no longer available to tend to the commands and expectations of the man she addresses. She further adds:

I have discovered.....  
your life isn't more precious  
your time isn't more valuable  
your profession isn't more noble  
your pay-cheque isn't heavier  
your status isn't more important  
than mine.

These lines reveal that the speaker of the poem has come to a breakthrough and has come to realize her worth though she has been made to believe that she is inferior to men. The traditional belief that a man is superior to a woman by virtue of his gender and physical strength has been dismissed by the empowered woman in the poem who realizes that her life, time, profession, pay-cheque and status is equally important and significant as those of the man addressed in the poem.

As the poem continues, Changkija brings to the attention of her readers the burden a woman is often encumbered with because of the dominance exerted upon her by her male counterparts. She exclaims that she has been rendered physically and mentally fatigued by the self-centered topics of conversations that focus only on the problems and ailments of the man in her life. She regards such problems as a way of negating or minimizing her personal and professional needs. She believes that tending to a man's need and constantly boosting his ego has relegated her own needs and desires "into the dark". She even professes that the person she is speaking to thinks that her very existence is to serve him:

I realize what you

hold to be true  
that the raison d'etre  
of my Being lies in  
rotating around you  
and yours.

She avows that he is wrong to think so. She tells him that her lines are “a written statement to say, you are wrong”. She further acknowledges that she has created a distance between them through her personal withdrawal. She claims that her aloofness is intentional:

The distance  
I have created  
between us  
is my way  
to let you know  
I don't have to spare a second  
of my life  
for anyone who sees in me  
just a shadow  
and expects of me  
merely to follow,  
besides other such factors.

Throughout the poem, she asserts that her poem is not meant to be an apology for what she has become. She realizes that she has become empowered enough to make her own decisions

and live the life she wishes to instead of hanging around and waiting on a man who does not appreciate her enough as a human being with a “body, heart and soul.” She also firmly declares that it would be impossible for her to offer her apologies to a person who has played a very significant role in diminishing who she is as a person:

... I cannot forgive  
 anyone who has taken  
 so much of me and contributed  
 so generously  
 to the erosion of the earlier me,  
 all in the name of love  
 and other such sentiments,  
 culminating always  
 in my imprisonment within  
 emotional relationships.

Her final lines confess about her feelings of entrapment in relationships she forms with men because all the things done to her are done in the name of love. Every sacrifice she makes or is expected to make is considered justified even when it is done at the cost of her own happiness. This is because a woman is considered to be responsible for catering to the needs of a man in a traditional Naga marriage which is “a totally unequal one, where the role of the wife is taken for granted as subservient” (Changkija, *Cogitating* 77). Changkija also further adds that “Naga marriage totally subverts the Naga woman’s personhood and that is generally her reality even in the larger context of the society” (82).

“Just One More Field My Child” is a touching poem by the Khasi poet Esther Syiem, of a mother laboring in the field who despite the pitiful cries of her young child calling for help continues with the demands of a hard labor to plough “just one more field”.

*Mei* don't keep me on hold any longer

Don't you know that my feet are clamped in its jaws?

Don't ask me to wait as you plough your field

My knees feel grazed as they're sucked deeper in

The poem with its underlying note of tragedy tells of the dilemma of the mother who has to toil to feed her family while taking care of her young one and in the process, has to make some hard choices in fulfilling her role as bread earner and caregiver.

Don't turn a deaf ear my *mei*, yes I know

Your burden is your commitment to feed me at dusk

(*Mei* : mother in Khasi)

As witnessed in most tribal cultures, the womenfolk are expected to contribute to hard labor for the upkeep of the family but are not spared the burden of all other chores expected of her as mother and caregiver to the family. This aspect is also seen in the poems of Ao and Changkija but the difference here lies in the lack of choice on the part of the mother. She is seen to eventually sacrifice the life of her own child for the greater good as it were.

You plough your field as if bewitched by a labor that

turns you away. I in terrifying death am enclosed.

In another of her poems called “The Hill of Woman’s Death,” Syiem takes up a Khasi legend about the father of a beautiful girl who organizes a race for all her suitors. The winner who could run the fastest up the hill would marry her. Tragically enough, even though the one favored by her won the race, he could not claim her due to his sudden death caused by exertion.

Here too, the destiny of a young girl is controlled by the father, against which she cannot protest. Such authoritarian control often ends in great tragedy for the female victim who as in the case of this legend, lives out the rest of her lonely days in mourning for her lover.

Father I know you decreed this for me.

My destiny you wrote

On these grassy steeps?

... You’ve stalled me forever

And the future is yours for the taking.

Meghalaya, as briefly explained in the introductory chapter, follows a matrilineal structure of society, but as Esther Syiem puts it in her essay “Khasi Matrilineal Society,” the system “elevates women but is powerless to help them in their multiple subjugations” (135). According to Khasi lores, women were entrusted to be keepers of the family name and society’s values as men had to go to war often dying in great numbers while defending their people. Fearing that their race would be wiped out, the role of caretaking and guarding family inheritance and culture was conferred upon the women by the men (ibid 133). In spite of their supposed position of power in their society, Khasi women are traditionally not allowed to attend the dorbar or local village/clan council and their role in decision-making is minimal. None of the traditional institutions of governance accept women and in the few areas where they have done so today, the roles assigned to them are peripheral or figurative (ibid 142-43).



Oyeronke Oyewumi writes in “Colonizing Bodies and Minds” that “women are peripheral if they appear at all” in their histories which have been written from male point of view (256). She also writes that during colonization, “the colonizer differentiated between male and female bodies and acted accordingly. Men were the primary target of policy, and, as such, they were the natives and so were visible” (ibid). She also opines, “For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination” (ibid 257). This is the same point that had been made earlier about double colonization, about women as the “Other” in a patriarchal society, as well as being the subaltern in culture specific traditions and practices such as in the discriminatory treatment of widows, unwed mothers, rape victims and others. All of these is above and beyond discriminations suffered due to race, creed and color.

As mentioned and elaborated upon, it is with the attempts to portray the plight and experiences of women oppressed by a system that the women poets dealt with in this chapter have raised counter-voices and resistances in different degrees. By highlighting the lot of women, they inform their readers of the fact often overlooked in a patriarchal society - that oppression in any form can never be naturalized, especially for the victims.

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## CONCLUSION

Since this dissertation makes a study of the selected poems from a postcolonial perspective, colonialism and its various phases is discussed briefly below. Colonialism is defined by Ania Loomba as “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods” (8). However, colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa or the Americas from the from the sixteenth century onward; it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history (ibid 8). Colonialism may be traced back to its height in the second century AD when the Roman Empire stretched from Armenia to the Atlantic. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols led by Genghis Khan conquered the Middle East as well as China. The fourteenth century saw the establishment of the Aztec Empire when one of the various ethnic groups who settled in the valleys of Mexico subjugated the others till the sixteenth century. The Aztecs extracted tributes in services and goods from conquered regions, as did the Inca Empire which was the largest pre-industrial state in the Americas. Various kingdoms in southern India too came under the control of the Vijaynagar Empire, while the Ottoman Empire extended itself over most of Asia Minor and the Balkans in the fifteenth century and extended further from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean (ibid).

Loomba further opines that modern European colonialism cannot be sealed off from these earlier histories of contact as the legendary exploits were “fuel for the European journeys to different parts of the world”. However, the newer European travels “ushered in new and different kinds of colonial practices which altered the whole globe” in a way the other colonialisms did not (ibid 9).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British empire spread across a vast area of the earth that included parts of Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean and Ireland but

towards the end of the century, many of its colonies broke free from the clutches of the British colonial empire. The twentieth century was, according to John McLeod, “the century of colonial demise, and of decolonization for millions of people who were once subject to the authority of the British crown (6). However, Britain continued to remain a colonial power with colonies in the Caribbean and the South Atlantic even in the twenty first century. In addition, the “material and imaginative legacies of both colonialism and decolonization remain fundamentally important constitutive elements in a variety of contemporary domains, such as anthropology, economics, art, global politics, international capitalism, the mass-media and ... literature” (7).

Postcolonial literature, as seen in the works of writers from North-east India, and in particular in the works of poets selected for this study, is “dialectic – between imperial systems and native subversion” (Nayar 83). This substantiates the claim that postcolonial literature attempts to “undo the discourse of Europe about native cultures, to decolonize oneself” (ibid). However, the poets of North-east India do not seek to subvert just European discourses or western centric ideologies that disparage the indigenous cultures of North-east India but also seek to resist all forces, be it internal or external, that contribute to the decrease in the values of traditional practices and customs. For poets belonging to the North-east community, the reassertion of their ethnic and cultural identity is even more crucial than it is for their counterparts in mainland India as their communities are constantly facing the threat of assimilation in economic and cultural spheres in this age of globalization. Almost all the states of North-east India are sparsely populated as shown in the introductory chapter, and the tribal communities constitute a very small percentage in the total population of India. Hence, the fear of cultural absorption by a more dominant culture is very real which is why the issue has been addressed by many poets as the previous chapters have studied and elucidated.

In Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1801), William Wordsworth had defined a poet as:

... a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe... (171)

Poets of North-east India may be seen to possess similar qualities in their given contexts and circumstances. However, as suggested earlier, the poets of North-east India have the added onus of speaking on behalf of their respective communities as “the writer can only tell the truth about what he knows” and therefore must “perforce master the art of witness” (Nongkynrih and Ngangom ix).

The arrival of British colonizers accompanied by Christian missionaries had, as already expounded on earlier, a strong impact on the local traditional belief systems of the different communities of North-east India. This resulted in a great cultural loss, as traditional belief systems were being relegated to the background while Christianity introduced many elements that were grounded in the western culture. This dissertation had attempted to analyze and show how several poets of North-east India endeavored to refute existing beliefs and ideals inherited from a colonial-centric thought process through a study of selected poems. The resultant counter-voices have been problematized and studied in the areas of faith, gender and identity of the different forms of domination that such factors have been subjected to.

The selected poems have thus been studied as articulations of counter-voices and examined to see how much they reflect of an awareness of a sense of loss and a crisis of identity. The poems have also been scrutinized for the efforts they have made to regain and re-establish what has been lost. In other words, the recovery of perceived losses, be they in the historical or socio-cultural sphere.

The study in attempting to analyze and elaborate these various counter-voices have shown how some of the voices resist and contradict claims and assumptions that have been made, and continue to be made, about the people of North-east India. The resistances have been voiced in varying ways and the poets are found to have many similar traits in the manner of articulating their thoughts and views.

Preeti Gill points out that in North-east India, a “whole way of life is dying, slowly melting away into the shadows of the unknown” (2). She also adds:

...Northeast region is at this sort of cusp – the old is giving way to the new, new beliefs, new dispensations, new power elites, new divisions and, of course, new alignments – it is a very difficult transition; made even more traumatic by internal conflicts and animosities that have been simmering for decades and are now on the boil. (ibid)

Subir Bhaumik writes that in the last few years, “the North East and the heartland have come to know each other better” and the “unfortunate stereotypes associated with the North East are beginning to peter off slowly” (xxi, xxii). However, he also admits that “many myths and misconceptions continue to persist” (xxi). Gill also asserts that “dominant stereotypes about the northeast region persist which often just reinforce the images we have of these very troubled lands which are beautiful but fraught with conflict” (3).

As elaborated in the preceding chapters, North-east India remains relatively isolated even today due to many factors one of which is its geographical location that poses the main hindrance as it restricts easy accessibility to the region. However, the region also occupies a strategic geopolitical situation due to its international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. North-east India came into the limelight of anthropological research only in the mid nineteenth century when foreign Christian missionaries, scholarly-oriented British administrators, distinguished sociologists and anthropologists attempted to portray the traditional life-styles, customs, rituals and belief systems through their writings. Names like J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mill, P.R.T. Gurdon, J. Shakespeare, T.C. Hodson, Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf, Verrier Elwin are significant amongst many others in exposing the hitherto unknown ethno-cultural groups of the North-east to the rest of India and beyond (Sharma and Sharma xv). However, as is characteristic of representations and perceptions by outsiders, the communities inhabiting the region were often misunderstood and hence misrepresented in many of the discourses and studies made on them.

The systems of self-governance which had sustained the indigenous communities for centuries were questioned by the colonizers who perceived themselves as superior because of their education, more advanced technology and wider world view of North-east India. The indigenous belief systems which had upheld concordance and tranquility to a great extent in the hearts of the local people were disregarded and often dismissed by the outlanders who perceived themselves and their religions as far superior. The missionaries who came to preach the gospel worked in sync with the colonizers who realized that the conversion of the indigenous people would facilitate them in their process of colonization. The traditional practices and customs of these communities were also snubbed and said to be “tedious primitive nonsense” (Ao, Blood



82) by the colonizers and missionaries. The traditional systems of social institutions served as a centre for educating the community on social and cultural values, such as, on how to conduct themselves in public, the duties each individual is obligated to fulfill both in the household and in the society, and also on the means of survival in times of warfare, natural calamities and hunting. But such knowledge systems were not taken into consideration when the foreigners arrived and established formal education and introduced new scripts to the indigenous communities. The assumptions made about the communities were prejudiced and biased when viewed from western-centric concepts of civilization and modernity.

The different changes brought about by British colonialism and introduction of foreign religions, especially Christianity by the missionaries from the outside world have been studied and its resultant consequences in selected poems have been analyzed in this dissertation. The psychological effects or colonial hangover is still apparent even today though colonialism of the British Raj is a thing of the past and has been so for almost seventy years. Many of the problems faced by the different communities of North-east India today are internal and caused by rivalries between different communities, but it should be realized that these conflicts, particularly conflicts of border and geo-politics have been the result of decisions and actions taken decades earlier by the colonial power. Some of the conflicts too are no doubt the impact of the political turmoil that has been sweeping through the states of North-east India prior to and post 1947. Many of the issues that have become intrinsic problems in North-east India have been discussed in the first four chapters. The first chapter introduces the study with attempts to justify the title of the work “Counter-voices in Selected Poems from North-east India”. The study undertakes to detect and analyze the resistances that have been put forward by poets from the region. As knowledge about the history of the people of the region is deemed imperative for a clearer

perception of the articulations of the poets, a brief historical overview of each of the eight states of North-east India – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim has been given. The selected poets have also been introduced briefly so that their poems may be better identified within their contexts.

The second chapter titled “Institutionalized Religion and Counter-voices” deals primarily with the indigenous beliefs systems and the institutionalized religions that later came to be introduced in the region with special emphasis on the Christian missionaries and Christianity. The selected poems by Temsula Ao, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Mamang Dai express views that question and reject new religious beliefs and new ways of life introduced, while valorizing indigenous beliefs and reviving the value systems of their forefathers. At the same time they also admit to the influences effected by the worldview of the outsiders wherein their indigenous belief systems have been relegated to the background with their acceptance of new beliefs.

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping the value systems and traditional practices of people, and the adoption of foreign religions entail the loss of such values and practices which were once intrinsic to a people. As the poems selected for this study suggests, the teachings of the new religion dismissed the indigenous belief systems as superstitious and primitive. Though the poets from the different states of North-east India portray their dissent in varying ways, a study of their poems shows that they are unified in their attempts to subvert the teachings that gave dominance to foreign religions over the indigenous ones.

Ao’s voice rings loud and clear in her two poems “Blood of Others” and “Musings During a Sermon”. The poem “Blood of Others” traces the initial days of the arrival of American Baptists in Nagaland where they taught the gospel of Christ with great fervor among the Nagas.

The study of this poem makes it evident that Ao is the voice of her community as she tries to celebrate the traditional practices and customs of her people before they were exposed to other cultures and religions. “Musings During a Sermon” also attempts to subvert the supposed superiority of Christianity and its promise of heaven or the promised land as it closes with the lines:

Ah, for me, a life of diversity!

Deliver me from an eternity

Of uncurious monotony.

With regard to Christian conversion of Nagaland, the people were taught that conversion to new religion was the only way a person could enter heaven after death. But the Nagas too had their own concept of afterlife which depended on how one lived one’s life, but this was not recognized by the Christian missionaries. Though the Christian missionaries were motivated by their desire to spread the gospel, they were also afflicted by notions of superiority which made them perceive any non-western way of life as barbaric and primitive. They could not comprehend, accept nor understand a way of life that was different from their’s, hence their disregard of indigenous practices and belief systems of the Naga tribes.

A similar course of Christian conversion in the neighboring regions took place. Kharmawphlang and Nongkynrih’s poems also reveal their counter-voices against new religions which led to the corrosion of their own set of beliefs and values as seen in Chapter 2. The chapter studies how Kharmawphlang visits Pahambir which is a place of extreme significance for the Khasis as a cultural centre. The journey made by the speaker of the poem with his friends is also symbolic of the growing desire among the Khasis to revive their traditional beliefs and practices again after many years of neglect. The poems by Nongkynrih are more direct in their approach

and endeavor to counter Christianity and other foreign religions. In his poem “Relations” he writes:

I want to cut off all ties with this place  
 and my zealot neighbours  
 whose great love for the Lord has turned them  
 into a blessed noise of the highest decibel.

Dai also offers her subtle voice of dissent and resistance in her poems by asserting the validity of their ethnic gods and beliefs systems. Contrary to the Biblical teachings of one benevolent God who created the Universe and takes care of all men, she writes:

Yes, I believe in gods.  
 In the forest faith  
 of good and evil,  
 spirits of the river,  
 and the dream world  
 of the dawn.

Instead of dismissing the indigenous belief of her people as primitive or uncivilized, she takes pride in them and manifests her acceptance and pride by writing about them.

The efforts made by these poets to celebrate their indigenous belief systems are crucial as they facilitate a better understanding and a more accurate perception of their respective communities. The misrepresentations and prejudices that are often made about them are clarified to a great extent by the selected poems as they bear witness to the validity and relevance of the tribal customs and practices that still impact their lives in contemporary times.

The third chapter titled “Counter-voices on Identity” addresses the question of identity and the directions taken by the selected poets in their attempts to establish their individual as well as communal identity. Poets like Cherrie L. Chhange, Paul Lyngdoh, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Mamang Dai and Yumlam Tana have been studied for their protests and countering of misrepresentations, stereotypes and prejudices as well as for the reassertion of their identities. As an examination of the poems show, the reassertion of identity is an important issue that needs to be addressed by the various communities of North-east India. As elaborated in Chapter 3, these poets have raised their voices to counter the barriers that marginalize them even further away from the mainstream culture of India. Comprising of a very small percent of the national population, the communities of North-east India are often sidelined as they differ from the mainlanders in many ways with regards to their languages, belief systems, cultural heritage and societal set up. The cultural and ethnic diversity of the people of the region also goes unrecognized with the tendency to homogenize them as one group of people under the umbrella term “North-east India.” But as explained in the previous chapters, North-east India is a region of vibrant diversity as the selected poets attempt to articulate by celebrating their respective cultures. It is also a fact that the people of the region themselves also contribute to their own notions of alienation and sense of neglect by often foregrounding their isolation and difference.

The question of identity also poses to be extremely crucial for the indigenous communities as forces like colonialism and globalization have influenced them to the degree that very little is retained of their old indigenous identities. Though it is imperative that one keeps pace with the fast changing world of technological advancements and cultural transformations, a clear perception and assertion of one’s identity is pivotal. An individual’s identity is predominately shaped by his cultural identity and it is through a sense a belonging to a unique

culture or community that one can find reassurance in his own identity. The poets are also well aware that the dangers faced by their communities are not just from external forces but also from within and is insidious. Paul Lyngdoh laments the loss of certain cultural values contributed by his own people in his satiric poem “For Sale” where he exposes the follies of his own people who have disregarded their tribal roots:

For sale  
 our cumbersome anachronistic tribal roots  
 that have thrown a spanner in our wheels of progress,  
 in our march away from our own,  
 and have become a constant source of embarrassment.

Meanwhile, a different kind of narrative is also detected in some poems like “The *Kurta* and the *Pyjama*” where the writer Tana appears to have transcended divisions and barriers that marginalize him by asserting:

I am all humanity  
 With no geographical boundary,  
 No social restrictions, no biological limitations  
 ...Nothing to divide me from my fellow men.

The fourth chapter entitled “Counter-voices of Women” concentrates on the women poets of the region like Temsula Ao, Monalisa Changkija and Esther Syiem. Women belonging to patriarchal societies which were formerly colonized have to resist both male-centric norms of their own culture as well as the impact of external colonialism. A study of the selected poems show that these women refuse to be silenced and have broken norms by speaking out to facilitate

the progress of the cause of women. Their counter-voices have been presented in various modes, sometimes with brutal attacks on the male members of the communities while at times, the voices are subtle without failing to be subversive.

Changkija, honest about her opinions writes:

I see it nowhere written  
 that your unironed shirts  
 deserve my attention  
 more than my flying lessons.

Such lines, among many others reflect the lot of women who are constantly held responsible for all domestic chores even when she has her own personal tasks and needs to attend to. However, progressive thinkers like Changkija have countered such conventional expectations and voiced their beliefs that women should not be subjected to such treatment.

Syiem is more elusive in her poems as she subtly confronts male-centric customs in her poems. In her poem “The Hill of Woman’s Death” she touchingly renders into verse a Khasi legend about a beautiful girl who could not marry the man she loved because he died in his endeavor to win her hand as necessitated by the decree set by her father. She mourns the loss of her beloved and also questions the system that gives her father so much power as she resigns to her fate:

Father I know you decreed this for me.  
 My destiny you wrote  
 On these grassy steeps?  
 To choose with a *kwai shi kyntein*

was my privilege denied.

You've stalled me forever

And the future is yours for the taking.

This fourth chapter undertakes to observe what women of North-east India have to articulate with regards to their position in the society. Though they have faced many hindrances that have been instrumental in curbing their progress in various ways, women of the region, as the study observes, are determined and unflinching in their endeavor. They have justified their counter-voices and resistances by presenting their plight and conditions in a patriarchal world.

The study of the selected poems by the poets from the different states of North-east India shows how poets from the region have asserted and celebrated their indigenous religious faiths and beliefs. The poets have not remained passive bystanders to the ongoing influences of foreign religions and teachings. Through their creative endeavors, they have voiced or created effective counter-voices. However, this study also reveals that the poets have not shied away from exposing the follies and shortcomings of their own people. This feature is particularly evident in the works of poets like Paul Lyngdoh and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and on a more personal note, Robin Ngangom. They perceive and admit that they too share the burden of the blame of divisiveness. A careful study of the poems also shows that the counter-voices of women are different as they are not just resisting colonialism but also the patriarchal setup of their respective communities. The study also shows how the identity crisis and sense of loss among the indigenous communities of North-east India have been addressed. The poets have attempted to re-establish their cultural and individual identity and to recover what according to them has been lost.



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## APPENDICES

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**TITLE OF DISSERTATION : COUNTER-VOICES IN SELECTED  
POEMS FROM NORTH-EAST INDIA**

**DATE OF ADMISSION : 30 July, 2014**  
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**SEMESTER/ DISSERTATION**

**APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

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**2. SCHOOL BOARD : 21 May, 2015**

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**ABSTRACT**

**COUNTER-VOICES IN SELECTED POEMS FROM  
NORTH-EAST INDIA**

**BY**

**LALSANGLIANI RALTE**

**Registration No. MZU/M.Phil./210 of 21.5.2015**

**SUPERVISOR**

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In the context of this dissertation, counter-voices refer to the expressions or opinions of writers from North-east India who have responded to and contradicted or opposed oppressive ideology which perceives and represents them in a manner that is not wholly acceptable to the represented people. The counter-voices also reflect dissatisfaction and concern over the treatment that has been meted out on a marginalized people or community by more powerful authorities like the British colonizers, Christian missionaries or the more dominant Indian societal structure. Several poets from North-east India have raised their voices to resist or counter existing colonial discourse, and also to redress pre-conceived notions about the often misunderstood communities of North-east India.

To expand further on the use and meaning of countering or resisting, it is a given that there will always be two sides, or a binary, wherein either of the two, or one of the two is resistant and in conflict with the other. This dissertation takes cognizance of the fact that counter-voices can and do exist even within the marginalized frameworks themselves. Instances of this can be between dominant groups within the same culture vying for power and status, and this can be witnessed particularly in the geo-political arena. The key chapters that deal with counter-voices found on institutionalized religion, identity and women deal with selected parameters which are dependent on the existent poems. This dissertation has chosen to focus more on the cultural and historical binary and encounters thereof with the world outside and their communities and known world that has impacted and changed their worldview. Poems worked upon in this dissertation are chosen primarily for their relevance to the parameters dealt with, and poems have not been chosen from Assam, Sikkim and Tripura as the counter-voices they present are different in nature and not wholly in compliance with the direction this dissertation attempts to take.

The very existence of North-east India within a larger Indian framework is subject to question, though the term has come to be widely accepted and used today as a panoptic term that includes eight states - Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. A population of 45,587,982 persons which is roughly 3.74 % of India's population belongs to these states according the Census of India 2011. More than two hundred tribes and sub-tribes are found in this region, with each tribe having its own unique culture and traditions (Das and Goswami 6). In spite of the racial and cultural diversity of the region, it has often been homogenized as a single entity denying the presence of myriad ethnic identities which are all unique in themselves.

However, it must also be acknowledged that the different tribes and sub-tribes of the region do share many similarities in terms of their history, traditional practices and belief systems. For instance, with the exception of the Assamese, the Manipuris and the Bengalis of Tripura whose written literature can be traced back to the fifteenth century or earlier, the literary history of most of the other communities began with the arrival of missionaries from Wales and America in the mid-nineteenth century (Ngangom and Nongkynrih x). However, even in the absence of written literature, the different tribes of North-east India had rich oral traditions which had been passed on from one generation to another.

Poets of North-east India deal with a wide array of topics. Their poems are by no means limited to ones that deal with colonialism and its aftermath. The poets of North-east India “collect the raw material from life's fount, in that stories come into being in the unfolding of the world of words in order to give some meaning to life while connecting the individual to the society, to the world” (Baral xi). A study of poems from this region show how universal themes

like romantic and platonic love, celebration of nature, exploration of legends and myths, globalization and the impact of advancements made in technology are also to be found. All poems from the region are not resistant in nature, and are also often inclusive and liberal and accepting of the oneness or unity of mankind. In her poem “Dot” Nini Lungalang ponders:

It makes me wonder;  
 if we claim to own  
 the land we live on  
 down to the centre of  
 the earth, which after all  
 is just a pinpoint dot –  
 who owns that dot? (169)

Sometimes, the counter-voices are also directed towards forces from within, and not always towards outsiders or external forces. For instance, in his poem “Play of the Absurd” Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih writes:

Old Powder Keg, Chief Minister of the hills  
 lackey of the plains, ordered a fox hunt.  
 A band of their rebels and strays students  
 were immediately shot to shreds. (47)

In this poem, Nongkynrih exposes the corrupt home-grown and bred politicians who glisten who “fabricated clumsy, home-spun lies” for their own material advancements without any real consideration for their people. Nongkynrih also takes up the issue of corrupt leaders in

another poem titled “Identification Marks” where he proclaims that the Syiems or Khasi traditional rulers “rule like commission agents/ and serve at the pleasure of scoundrels” (77). However, for the purpose of the selected thrust of this dissertation, poems which may be read and analyzed as articulations of indignation at colonial constructs and assumed representations have been selected for detailed study.

The first chapter Introduction situates the title of the dissertation “Counter-voices in Selected Poems from North-east India” into perspective, and places it in context by examining North-east India and its historical mosaic, events and situations that have prompted the counter-voices and resistances.

The second chapter of the dissertation titled “Institutionalized Religion and Counter-voices” studies the works of poets like Temsula Ao from Nagaland, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih from Meghalaya, and Mamang Dai from Meghalaya. Their poems have been scrutinized to see if and how they have raised their voices against institutionalized religions and the effects such religions have had on the indigenous belief systems of their respective communities. Religion plays a major role in the life of man, and the belief in a divine or supernatural being has always existed in the mind of man. A study of the poems reveals the indigenous belief systems which had formed and shaped the ethical values and survival skills of communities from time immemorial when their ancestors had lived in obscurity without external influences. However, their existing beliefs and religious practices were dismissed by the white missionaries who worked with the colonizers and relentlessly tried to convince the tribes that their beliefs systems were “tedious primitive nonsense” (Ao 82) and introducing Christianity as an alternative belief. This system of relegating the indigenous

practices continued even after India got her independence though it took on a different form when free India conducted her first census in 1951.

During the British rule in India, the British Indian Census had a religious category with varying designations like ‘animists’, ‘naturalists’, ‘primitive’ and so on. However, this category was eliminated in the 1951 census and the people who were previously designated as ‘animists’, ‘naturalists’ or ‘primitive’ were absorbed into Hinduism if they had not converted into Christianity, Islam or Buddhism (Oommen 10). This was a crucial action made by the dominant central government which failed to recognize the validity of the belief systems of the marginal and smaller communities. Such factors have contributed to their gradual disappearance especially in states like Nagaland and Mizoram where almost a hundred percent of the indigenes have converted into Christianity.

Today, many writers from North-east India have taken it upon themselves to validate their history, faith and culture through their writings as a study of the selected poems will show. Some writers are more direct and blunt in their attempts to subvert the supposed superiority of the new religions, especially that of Christianity. For instance, in his poem “Relations”, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih exclaims:

I want to cut off all ties with this place  
 and my zealot neighbours  
 whose great love for the Lord has turned them  
 into a blessed noise of the highest decibel. (117)

Meanwhile, other counter-voices are more subtle in nature and are more inclined towards the celebration of their own indigenous beliefs rather than a direct frontal attack on new or foreign religions. Mamang Dai writes:

Yes, I believe in gods.

In the forest faith

of good and evil,

spirits of the river,

and the dream world

of the dawn. (57)

Here, Dai seeks to validate the belief system of her people by celebrating it and giving it due recognition. In her own insidious way, she is teaching her people of the value and significance of their belief system which is beyond comparison with other religions as it is unique and complete in itself.

Temsula Ao offers a different kind of counter-voice as she opines in her poem “Musing During a Sermon”:

If this be heaven

Give me no share therein

Give me instead

All of the yesterdays,

Todays and tomorrows

Of this life of joys



And sorrows.

Ah, for me, a life of diversity!

Deliver me from an eternity

Of uncurious monotony. (25)

In this poem, she attempts to subvert the notion that heaven or the Promised Land will be a wonderful place to live in after life on Earth is done. She claims that she would like no share of the heaven that had been taught to her people by the missionaries. In this way, she refuses to acknowledge that the concept of the after-life as taught by the missionaries is superior to the concept of afterlife the Nagas have.

The third chapter of this dissertation titled “Counter-voices on Identity” attempts to detect and study the voices that have been raised with regards to identity. In North-east India, political colonization by a foreign power is of the past and no longer exists today. Colonialism, however, is still present by the presence of a dominant “mainland” or “mainstream” construct which is India. The issue that needs to be distinctly addressed, therefore, is how attitudes and mindsets of the region have been shaped by the encounter with various forms of colonialism both internal and external. The negotiation with other cultures, both in the past and present, has resulted in generating questions about one’s identity and resistance amongst communities of North-east India. In other words, this experience of self doubt has provoked questions about their own indigenous beliefs and cultural identity that so far had set them apart and given them pride and a sense of selfhood. They, therefore, sometimes believe that a hybridization of their native culture with an alien culture takes place as is borne out by some of the poems that are dealt with in this

study. Hybridity as understood in literary discourse is the “creation of new cultural forms and identities as a result of the colonial encounter” (Nayar 200). The chapter will make a study of the psychological impact of various colonialisms that continue to plague the psyche of poets from the region, and will put forward the counter-voices that have been raised on identity.

Each individual has an identity which may be personal, ethnic or cultural. Identities may also be imposed on a people by outsiders as it has often been the case with the people of North-east India. For instance, anthropologists and administrators during the British Raj in their writings created the notion of a primitive and barbaric people when referring to natives of the region particularly those from the hills. A surveyor from the British army, R.G. Woodthorpe writes that the Nagas are “bloodthirsty, treacherous and revengeful” (57). The Khasis of Meghalaya were also perceived as “pagans” and “barbarians” by the conquering British (Talukdar 2).

Poems by Yumlam Tana and Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, Cherrie L. Chhangte from Mizoram, Paul Lyngdoh and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih from Meghalaya, Robin S. Ngangom from Manipur, and Temsula Ao from Nagaland are studied in this chapter. The different poems deal with the issue of identity in their own unique ways. Yumlam Tana appears to have transcended man-made divisions and differences as he writes in his poem “The *Kurta* and the *Pyjama*”:

I am all humanity

With no geographical boundary,

No social restrictions, no biological limitations

... Nothing to divide me from my fellow men. (13)

However, he takes care to show his pride in his ethnic identity as he proudly claims “I am a Nyishi”.

A different tone of counter-voice is detected in the poems by Cherrie L. Chhangte who writes in her poem “Plea”:

Demythologize me,  
 I would rather be a person  
 Than a representative of my tribe;  
 Individualistic and selfish  
 With personal quirks,  
 But also personal needs. (75)

Her poem counters identity stereotypes imposed upon her by others who fail to recognize her individuality. Her desire to redefine herself and not have her identity constructed by other people is apparent in the poem as she confesses to having individualistic and selfish quirks and needs.

Meanwhile Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih calls himself:

A recalcitrant Indian, since I am buried  
 too deep in my tribal roots and refuse to be  
 swept away by the Main Stream. (106)

In this poem titled “Self-actualization”, he takes pain to re-assert his tribal roots and claims that he refuses to be swept away by the more dominant main stream culture.

Such counter-voices, amongst many others, have been detected in several poems from North-east India though differing in tone and approach. As Tilottoma Misra puts it, “people whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process from the past to the future” (xvii).

The fourth chapter titled “Counter-voices of Women” focuses primarily on the works of women poets like Temsula Ao and Monalisa Changkija from Nagaland and Esther Syiem from Meghalaya. In most societies, women have been “relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 233). In a way, women may be equated to colonized races and cultures with whom they share “an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and suppression” (ibid 233). Women of formerly colonized regions are often said to be “doubly colonized”. Double colonization is the notion that women in formerly colonized societies were “doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies” (ibid 233). They have suffered more than their men folk have; under a dominant alien culture and a rigid patriarchal system within their own social fabrics.

Though the poems selected for study in the chapter include only the works of women from Nagaland and Meghalaya, women from the other communities of North-east more or less share the same plight. All the communities of North-east India are patriarchal in nature, including that of Meghalaya which follows a matrilineal lineage but posits power and authority with U Kni - the maternal uncle. Constant subjection to male authority has resulted in vivid counter-voices which seek to subvert the notion that women should be bound by conventional

norms which do not recognize their individuality and needs. The study of the poems also exposes that domestic violence in which women are the main victims are also rampant in these societies.

In one of her untitled poems, Monalisa Changkija writes,

I see it nowhere written  
 that your unironed shirts  
 deserve my attention  
 more than my flying lessons. (26)

These lines speak for themselves in their attempt to subvert the established idea that it is the duty of the women-folk to attend to all the needs of men even if it means sacrificing their time and other pursuits that give them pleasure. The assertion that a woman's flying lessons deserve as much of her attention as the unironed shirt of a man is bold and resistant in nature, especially more so with the knowledge that flying lessons are deemed an arena of men.

Esther Syiem's poems are more subtle, though not failing to highlight how male-centric authoritarian forces often lead to the misery and suffering of women. In her poem "The Hill of Woman's Death," Syiem takes up a Khasi legend about the father of a beautiful girl who organizes a race for all her suitors. The winner who could run the fastest up the hill would marry her. Tragically enough, even though the one favored by her won the race, he could not claim her due to his sudden death caused by exertion. The destiny of the young girl is controlled by the father, against whom she cannot protest. Such authoritarian control often ends in great tragedy for the female victim who as in the case of this legend, lives out the rest of her lonely days in mourning for her lover.

Father I know you decreed this for me.

My destiny you wrote

On these grassy steeps?

... You've stalled me forever

And the future is yours for the taking. (178)

Such are the counter-voices that have been raised by the women poets of North-east India. Oyeronke Oyewumi writes in "Colonizing Bodies and Minds" that "women are peripheral if they appear at all" in their histories which have been written from male point of view (256). She also writes that during colonization, "the colonizer differentiated between male and female bodies and acted accordingly. Men were the primary target of policy, and, as such, they were the natives and so were visible" (ibid 256). However, as this study proves, the women poets have not languished in silence, and instead of remaining mute, they have presented their counter-voices and resistances and in the process, representing all women subjected to the same predicament.

The final chapter brings the study to a conclusion by highlighting the key points studied and examined in the preceding chapters. The counter-voices raised by the poets deal with different issues that are relevant not just for the North-east region of India but also for other communities who share similar histories of colonization. With globalization taking over the world by storm, the regions that were once colonized now enjoy a level playing field, having access to the same opportunities and advancements as their former colonizers, keeping them at par to a great extent. The growing popularity of theories like postcolonialism which offers counter-discourses especially after the 1970s have also contributed to a general reawakening among communities whose identities have been displaced and disregarded.

Initiatives are being taken by scholars in academia, by social and political activists, and society in general, to revive and reassert cultural identities and values today in different parts of the region. The trends in academic research, for example bear witness to this, as suggested in the emerging literatures of the region. The nostalgia for the traditional and indigenous way of life is equated with the idea of selfhood and a revived identity, and this is manifested in writings from the region.

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