POETIC RESISTANCE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY:
A STUDY OF SELECT POETRY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

BY

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "Poetic Resistance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Select Poetry of North-east India" written by Lalmalsawmi Ralte has been written under my supervision.

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

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DECLARATION

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

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis titled "Poetic Resistance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Select Poetry of North- East India" is to examine critically poets of diverse ethnicities of Northeast India whose creative achievements are being highly recognized at home and abroad. The thesis seeks to study how the selected poets of the region have responded poetically to the widely prevalent perceptions about the Northeast ensued by discursive historiography through poetic resistance. Dealing with an analysis of how selected poets of the region have used their myths and legends in poetry to assert their ethnic identity, a focus on their individual identity vis-à-vis their ethnic identity has been stressed to see how the poets have dealt with their idea of identity in the contemporary times within the thesis. It is a study on how their poetry centers around the subject of the marginalized man and woman in a matrilineal/patriarchal society which reflects how they try to negotiate with power structure in their respective societies.

Among many poets writing in English, five poets have been selected within the purview of this thesis: Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. These poets who may well be called the firsts of the generation of poets writing in English in Northeast India belong to different major ethnic groups which are identifiable in the Northeast. Looking at the present scenario of English poetry among the writers of Northeast India, it can be well said that not all ethnicities have produced poets of eminence (T. Misra xxi). However, the poet's probe and sensitive appraisal does cut across the equally distinctive and diverse clan categories and present their experiences that are

effectively common and shared. Although there are innumerable poets both in vernacular and English languages, poems from the older poetic traditions such as Assamese, Bengali and Manipuri are not part of the study whereas some poems that have been translated from vernacular languages into English have been taken into this critical enterprise.

Temsula Ao (b. 1975), a retired professor of North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) Shillong, is an Ao- Naga poet and a writer. She has published six volumes of poetry: *Songs that Tell* (1988), *Songs that Try to Say* (1992*), Songs of Many Moods* (1995), *Songs from Here and There* (2003), *Songs From The Other Life* (2007) and *Songs Along The Way Home* (2017). Ao has also published an ethnographic book *The Ao- Naga Oral Tradition* (2009), two short stories collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and an autobiography titled *Once Upon a Life* (2013). Apart from these, Ao has also written several essays that have been published online and in journals. For her literary work, Ao is the recipient of Padma Bhushan in the year 2007, Governor's Gold Medal in 2009, Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 and the Kusumagraj National Literature Award in 2015.

Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang (b. 1964) is a Khasi folklorist and a bilingual poet. He is a professor who teaches in the Cultural and Creative Studies, NEHU and is currently its Head of the Department. Kharmawphlang has two books of poems called *Touchstone* (1987) and *Here*, a collection of essays called *Ki Matti Byrshem, Narratives of North-East India I & II, Folklore in the Changing Times, Conference, Confluence;* another collection of essays on Folkloristics namely *Attributes of Khasi Folklore, Khasi Folksongs and Tales, Orality and Beyond, Essays in Khasi Folkloristics* and *Folklore Imprints in Northeast India.*

Mamang Dai (b. 1957) is an Adi poet, novelist and journalist whose works include *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003), *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004), and two illustrated folklore books *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime* (2003). She has also three novels to her credit: *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008) and *The Black Hill* (2014). Her collection of poetry are *River Poems* (2004), *The Balm of Time* (2008), *Hambreelsai's Loom* (2014), and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics* (2014).

Robin Singh Ngangom (b. 1959), a Manipuri bilingual poet who writes in English and Manipuri, is a professor in the Department of English whose books of poetry include *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). He has co-edited a collection of poetry from Northeast India titled *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009). He has also translated several Manipuri poetry and was awarded the Katha Award for Translation in 1999.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (b. 1964) is a Khasi poet who teaches in the Department of English, NEHU. He not only writes in Khasi and English but also translates poems and fiction. Having 13 publications in Khasi and 9 in English, Nongkynrih's collections of poetry in English include *Moments* (1988) , *The Sieve* (1992), *The Yearning of Seeds* (2011) and *Time's Barter: Haiku and Senryu* (2015). He has also written a collection of Khasi folktales titled *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2011) and is the co-editor of *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (2009). He has also been awarded with the first Veer Shankar Shah-Raghunath Shah National Award for Literature (2008), the first North-East Poetry Award (2004) and a Fellowship for Outstanding Artists 2000 by the Department of Culture and Tourism, Government of India.

Although there were established names like Nilmani Phookan and Navakanta Barua, both belonging to Assamese culture, L. Biakliana a Mizo poet, and Thangjam Ibopishak a Manipuri poet only to name a few in the tradition of poetry- writing following Independence from the British, their works were inaccessible due to the medium in which they were writing. In the 1987 *Telegraph Colour Magazine* edited by Jayanta Mahapatra, there was a feature on English poems written by poets from Shillong. Older generation Indian poets like Binod K. John, Adil Jussawalla and Jayanta Mahapatra himself saw these poems in English written by poets of Shillong as "breaking new grounds" in Indian English writing (Guha *Poetry of Feeling*) as the poems showcased the multiple voices in the region that had been enigmatic to many people. Ever since then, interests in and publications of works in English by writers in the Northeast of different genre have grown considerably, leading to the recognition of writers from the Northeast like Temsula Ao, Ananya S. Guha, Mamang Dai, Mona Zote and Easterine Kire among the many. In the contemporary age, there is a significant growth of younger writers writing in English due to the prevalence of education in English-medium in schools and also because English has been adopted by most hill-states of the Northeast as their official language (T. Misra xv).

Poetry of the English language, produced in contemporary Northeast India is marked by voices of dissent and concerns for ethnic identity. In his critique of poetry emerging from the Northeast, Saikat Guha opines that they are voices that represent "the disillusionment of the people" who constitute the marginalized and the neglected, living in underdeveloped regions (75). The interest in Indian writing in English in the late 1980s across the nation ushered in an important milestone for writers writing in English in Northeast India. Although there had always been an

indisputable strong literary culture in many communities of the region, lack of exposure had kept them under- appreciated and many of their works unrecognized. When talking of literature in the Northeast, the fact that there is a well-established literary culture in vernacular languages like Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri, Khasi, Mizo, Kokborok and others side by side with the growing literature in English language must not be overlooked. Many writers such as Indira Goswami, Malsawmi Jacob, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are bilingual. As mentioned by Nongkynrih, there had already existed a sense of literary tradition among the people of the Northeast beginning from their tradition of storytelling even before the advent of Western education in the region (viii) and education has helped in stimulating the literary culture among the people of the Northeast.

Despite the fact that Western education was introduced by the missionaries as early as the end of the nineteenth century, literary writings in English began rather late in the region. The few that were published by the turn of the twentieth century were overshadowed by the existing vernacular literature (Dutta 2018). Moreover, in the literary tradition of the older generation such as Manipuri literature, there were significant changes that took place due to the influence of modern education brought about by Western education (T.K. Singh 151). The requirements for stability of the new form of modern literature, the process of acculturation that require an extensive process of assimilation and internalization of different cultures, the "transition from the oral to the written" (Zama xii) and the lack of market for English writings might have contributed to the belated production of writings in English among the different communities. However, there has been tremendous growth of writings in English across the region in the past few years both in the form of original works and translations that constitute a whole body of "emerging" literature in the Northeast

(Zama xi) and both national and international magazines and journals have shown unprecedented interest in literary works of the Northeast since 2008. According to Tilottoma Misra, many critics and scholars of this emerging body of literature in English are quick to notice its stark difference from mainstream Indian writing in English. This is often because of the writers' tendency to respond to prevalent cultures through their acute awareness of cultural loss and recovery (xiii); a loss which is distinct from mainstream India due to different experiences of colonialism in the Northeast but which is a shared experience among the many tribes living in the region who were isolated from the rest of India during British imperialism.

To invoke good reasons for the culture- conscious tribes and non- tribes of this region and as a stimulant of their poetic endeavours, a short description of the checkered history of the northeast region of India is apt. The Northeast is inhabited by three major groups, classified as "the hills tribes, plains tribes and non-tribal population of the plains" (B.P Singh 258). According to the 2011 Census of India, the total population of the tribes inhabiting the northeastern part of India is 46 million, thereby constituting 44.23 % of the total 104 million population of India's tribals. Inhabitants of Northeast India speak over 220 different languages and dialects; ranging from Indo- European, Trans-Himalayan/Sino-Tibetan, Kra-Dai, Austro-asiatic with inclusion of some Creole language families. Of them, Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri and Bodo have been recognized among the 22 languages of India in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution. Religion-wise, according to 2011 Census of India, 54.02% of the total population are Hindus, Muslims 25.05%, 17.24% Christians, 1.37% Buddhist, 0.07% Jain, 0.07% Sikh and 1.97% of the population belong to other indigenous religions.

The poetry of Northeast India is diverse and has age-old traditions that have descended from the oral tradition of folktales and folksongs. These oral traditions were handed down from one generation to the other in informal systems like dormitories and in other occasions through chants, songs and stories. In fact, many communities in Northeast India have "a vibrant storytelling tradition" whose influence in the literary outcomes have been dominant till date (T. Misra xvii). These oral traditions became important markers of identity as the creation stories, myths and folktales including indigenous knowledge were contained. Referring to Ao-Naga oral tradition, Longkumer says of the vital role that they played: that it was their oral tradition that played the fundamental role in shaping not just their history, but also their religion as well as their social life (11). Similarly, the Khasi stories have been handed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition where the elders in the community took the responsibility of teaching morals to the children (Mawrie 58). In his collection of the myths of Arunachal Pradesh, Elwin had remarked that although there are depictions of external influences, some myths retain their originality by being "greatly altered" (xx) and while many are "rich in 'poetic' ideas" (xxi), many myths also reflect the realistic temperament of imagination by the presence of "ugly people in their stories" side by side with "many lovely creatures whose memory has come down from generation to generation" (xxii). Despite the differences in material culture, Birendranath Datta states that there is "a certain 'commonness' and 'togetherness'" in the folklore material of the Northeast (122) and a closer study reveals that these oral traditions reflect the tribes' awareness of the presence of their neighbours through the inclusion of "'non-tribals' in the plains" in their myths and legends (125) which represents the comprehensive world-view that they possessed.

Following the colonial rule, some of the tales and songs of the tribes inhabiting these hills were recorded by the British administrators like P.R.T Gordon, J. Shakespeare, T.C. Hodson, Major A. Playfair, J.P. Mill, Sidney Endle and others (T. Misra xvii) which included several observations of the people inhabiting the region. This was done not only as part of the colonist's sociological/anthropological approach to understanding the tribes who were markedly different from the rest of India but to acquaint the people of their contact with their fellow-citizens back at their homeland. Eventually, there began a gradual shift from orality to the written even among the natives themselves through which occurred an evolution of literature due to colonial intervention. In the contemporary age, the degree to which this evolution of literature takes place is accelerated by the varying changes brought about by time that have enabled writers across communities to "seek new ways to negotiate, translate and expose their world views" (Zama xii). In fact, it is this diversity in the contemporary poetical works across communities in the Northeast that defines its richness.

Northeast India comprises eight administrative division states of India, all sharing international boundaries: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Officially known as North Eastern Region (NER), it is stretched, according to Northeast Portal, "between 89.46 degree to 97.30 degree East longitude and 21.57 degree to 29.30 degree North latitude." It enjoys subtropical climate, influenced by the Himalayan climate to the north, the Meghalayan plateau to the south and the hills of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur to the east. Characterised by tropical and temperate forests, the region has "enormous variation in their typology and floral characteristics, ranging from tropical evergreen at lower altitude in upper Brahmaputra valley to pine forests in the Himalayas and birch–

rhododendron scrub at still higher levels" (Dikshit 213). These "landlocked" eight northeastern states of India form "a compact geographical unit" that is highly dependent with one another (Chaube 6) not only in terms of economy but also in terms of road and water connectivity as well. The Brahmaputra river that flows through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam has been an important water-body for transport and in its support of various life-forms since the British introduced steam navigation which opened new doors of communication with the rest of the nation (Dikshit 3). In fact, the Northeast is connected to the rest of India through a narrow opening popularly known as "Chicken's Neck" corridor (Hazarika *Strangers of the Mist* xvi) which is about 22 kilometres located in Siliguri, West Bengal. It is flanked by the Himalayan range in the north, the Arakan range in the east and the Bay of Bengal in the south and shares its boundaries with Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The different communities that have occupied the present Northeast India have migrated from different places at different times. Although their "racial purity" is questionable due to the pattern of their migration in the past (Chaube 2), many of them share cultural affinities and religious practices with one another. Tribes of the Northeast have been found to share common myths and knowledge systems while being influenced by other cultures: the symbol of "thread-square," by which spirits are "thwarted" by "ancestral spirits" (Biswas & Thomas xv) is also found among the Indo-Austric to Tibeto-Burman people whereas the "myths of 'mother goddess' as the primordial female principle" which has led to the practice of "devi worship" in the Northeast has been an influence from the Indo- Gangetic cultures (xvi). According to R.K. Bijeta Sana, affinities occurred among the different tribes of the Northeast since they had to adapt to the common conditions in terms of their material culture and socio-economic pattern as well as similarity in "the ecology and historical conditions

that produced similar, though not the same, mode or pattern of society and culture" which had "easily led the colonial writer to label clusters of people under one generic term - 'tribes'" (34-35).

The earliest migration into the present Northeast India is believed to have taken place in Assam by 500 B.C from Southeast Asia, followed by migrants who, according to Taher, a noted historian, were "from the north, north-east and east" and were "mostly the Tibeto-Burman language speaking people" (12). Taher notes that speakers of Indo-Aryan dialect began to migrate from the Gangetic plains "about the fifth century before Christ" (12). It is believed that migration of Mongoloid people from the north and east took place in a long series within different time (Dikshit 3). These different groups of Mongoloid people settled down in varying times at different habitats and ecological settings resulting in the crystallization "into distinct entities which are referred to as tribes today" (Ali 141). Because of the varying physical features of the people that inhabit the land, to quote Sanjoy Hazarika, "the Northeast has best been described as Asia in miniature, a place where the brown and yellow races meet and mingle" (xvi).

The present distribution of similar tribes or sub-tribes in different places attest to their migration pattern; while most Naga tribes are found within Nagaland, the Tangkhul Nagas live in Manipur and Biate tribe, a sub-tribe of the Mizo live in Assam. According to Robbins Burling, migration pattern of the different tribes living in the present Northeast India suggest how each individual ethnic groups has adjusted to the environmental condition as well as the economic and political conditions. Burling also notes that since the early days of migration, "ethnic differences were constructed, and ethnic loyalty invoked" as a mode of defense against unruly aggressors. It might not be wrong to assume that the construction of "ethnic

differences" had been fundamental to the survival of different tribes. In fact, many folktales and folksongs of Northeast India have mentioned folk heroes who had bravely fought against invading tribes including British administrators which had been marked by initial protests from the people; examples of which are the Mizo chieftess Ropuiliani (b. unknown - 1894), whose fight against the British has been rendered into a popular song "Ropuiliani" by Lalsangzuali Sailo (1949-2006) or the Khasi chief U Tirot Sing (1802- 1835) whose last days as a captive of the British has been poetically rendered by Desmond Kharmawphlang in his poem "A Song for U Tirot Sing" (1993).

Politically, the tribes of the Northeast had never been under the governance of a single ruler: most tribes had their intrinsic way of lives and were governed by their respective chiefs or councils of village elders according to their cultural and religious practices or customary laws until the Treaty of Yandaboo paved the way for the British administration in the region in 1826 (Tohring xii). The hill tract of Chittagong had already fallen to the British following the Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 whereby Tripura was assaulted by the combined armed forces of the East India Company and the Nawab in the year 1761 (Chaube 3). However, Ahom and Manipur kingdoms fell to the Burmese: Ahom kingdom was invaded thrice during 1817-1826 AD, and more than a century of peaceful Ahom kingdom was disrupted by Burmese invaders during the years 1821-1825 AD. Manipur kingdom was ruled by the Burmese during 1819-1825 AD. It was Chandrakanta Singha of Assam who had asked for military support of the British East India Company by the end of the 18th century. The Burmese Invasion resulted in the First Anglo- Burmese War of 1824-1826 AD which in turn, eventually rendered the north-eastern part of India under the control of the British empire through the signing of the Treaty of

Yandaboo. According to Falguni Rajkumar, the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 "changed the course of the ethnic identity history of North East of India" because it "changed and affected various aspects of the polity, social and general life of the people in Northeast India" (90). According to Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra, the Treaty of Yandaboo was a boon to the British as

> (It) provided the British with the foothold they needed to annex Northeast India, launch further campaigns to capture Burma's vital coastal areas, and gain complete control of the territory from the Andaman Sea to the mouth of the Irrawaddy River.

The whole of the present Northeast India eventually fell under British administration with the Naga Hills being the last to be conquered by the British in 1881 (U. Misra 20). This offered the British administrators the opportunity to "introduce a concept of difference between the hills and the plains" while taking measures so that "the economic interests of the British in the plains were not disturbed" (Maitra). This strategy was basically "not to expose them to the influence of the plains" (Deka 3) where there were various uprisings against the British administrators over revenues. Soon, this "concept of difference" was formulated through the introduction of inner-line regulation in the Government of India Act of 1935. Quoting Mackenzie, Chaube states that the Inner Line Regulation "was 'defined merely for the purpose of jurisdiction' and did not 'decide the sovereignty beyond'" (14). This regulation "restricted the entry of all non-tribals, British Indian citizens and foreigners into these areas except by permit" (Rajkumar 90).

Some historians have mentioned that annexation of the present Northeastern part of India was not the original plan of the British: the 1869 *Memorandum on the*

North-east Frontier of Bengal prepared by Alexander Mackenzie, then the in charge of Political correspondence of the Bengal government, revealed that the idea of India's Northeast was "Bengal specific" (Deka 2) and in the words of A.C Banerjee, it obtained the attention of the British because of "pressing political necessity" (Chaube 3). As mentioned in the 9 January 1939 *Evening Standard of London*, a new map of India was issued by the Government where changes were made which "involved the grouping of new provinces and the regrouping of states into different political charges" (Hazarika *Strangers No More* xx). It was in this new map of India that there was an inclusion of a definitive boundary between the hilly areas of Northern Assam and Tibet. Eventually, political necessity provided prospects of economic profits as coal, tea and petroleum were discovered in Assam. According to Chaube, the setting up of tea industry in Assam during the nineteenth century had "strengthened the case for a 'forward policy' on the hills" (7).

Since 1972, the Northeast as a term came to mean what Mackenzie described as "the whole of the hill ranges north, east, and south of the Assam valley, as well as the western slopes of the great mountain system lying between Bengal and independent Burma, with its outlying spurs and ridges" (1) that eventually came under the British rule after the tribes were "subdued" by the British administrators. Poets of the region have responded to British rule in the Northeast by providing alternative voices that contest the idea of British civilization and their methods of rule among the people of the Northeast. Monalisa Changkija in her poem "One of These Decades" (Misra 89) mentions how the British administered their lands by keeping them "chained to be tamed/ To keep their date with destiny" (7-8), revealing the British administrators' propaganda of fulfilling their expansionist plans which clearly did not consider the welfare of the indigenous community. Insisting on the idea of

their "strong and secure hills" (6), Changkija reasserts the security that the inhabitants of these hills feel in their own land.

Prior to the British, the historiography of Northeast India has been problematic because of unreliable sources. In the words of Falguni Rajkumar, "the sources of history are unclear, and their authenticity often shrouded in mystery and hence considered unreliable" (11). This observation is true especially of the tribes living in the hills of the Northeast. However, there are historical documents of some of the places of Northeast India especially those of the plains. The account of Xuanzang or Hieun Tsang, a Chinese monk and traveler who had visited Kamarupa, now known as Assam, during the reign of Bhaskar Varman during 603- 604 AD reflected the life of the people living in Assam during the 7th century. Apart from describing the climate and physical features of the people inhabiting the land, Xuanzang's account of the existence of "various temples belonging to various tribes" (A. Borah) marks the presence of different tribes in Kamarupa as early as the 7th century.

While the presence of a full-fledged civilization in Assam has been well-documented and mentions of Kamarupa or Pragjyotishpur has been found in the mid-fourth century ancient pillar of Samudragupta (M.M. Sharma 1978); references to Tripura have been made in Ashoka pillar of the 6th century BC (Saigal 71); Manipur has been mentioned in historical documents dated back to 900 AD (Gajrani 126), and Arunachal Pradesh has been mentioned in ancient *Puranas* dated back to 400- 500 BC (Kaur); yet there are very little documents on the remaining states of Northeast India prior to the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century. The few written ones are largely official documents and findings conducted by the British officials. LW. Shakespear, in his book *History of the Assam Rifles* (1929) introduced the people that the Assam Rifles were working with as follows:

> These are the Himalayas on the Brahmaputra north bank, the Naga, Patkoi, and Manipur hills to the east, the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo hills in the centre, while to the south are the Lushai hills. All these mountain regions are inhabited by wild tribes differing in every conceivable way from those of India proper. … The depredations and gradation of raids of these wild folk have necessitated at varying intervals their particular tribal areas being taken over by the British, to ensure peace and prosperity as civilization extended up both river systems. (2)

Col. A. Scott Reid in his book *Chin- Lushai Land* (1893) cites an account given by his fellow Englishman where comparison is made between the Mizo and Khasi tribes. The Englishman called the Khasis "the bravest and most warlike of all the tribes of India" who he said "were more bloodthirsty than the Lushais" (3). Following the reduction of the Khasi language into writing and introduction of modern education by the missionaries, Reid talks about the condition of the educated youths:

> Now the Khasias are running the Bengalis a close race as clerks and accountants in the cutcherries (Government offices) at Shillong; …their foremost youths are aspiring to University degrees; and in female education they are officially stated to take lead of all the Indian races. (3)

This being the case with the Khasis, Reid had expressed his hope that the Lushai youths would follow suit once missionaries in the field began their work among them. Reid's narration of his fellow Englishman's impression of the Khasi and Lushai youths reflect the attitude of the administrators towards the homogenization of the people of the Northeast which has continued till date. Poets writing in English

today are by- products of the Western education with which Reid had hoped they would be able to secure better future for themselves. Like other postcolonial writers around the world, poets writing in English have used the language of the colonizers to "write back" to resist against historical biases.

The contacts of the British administrators and the people of the Northeast at different intervals in the early nineteenth century was clearly the meeting of two different worlds: while the former had already imbibed a very complex self-conscious notion of superiority backed by scientific advancements in accordance to the Western world, the latter was still living among jungles and treacherous mountains with their own moral codes in their secluded way of life. Eventually the people inhabiting the Northeastern part of India became subjected to binary oppositions created by colonial hierarchy as an outcome of the difference between the colonists and the natives. This binary opposition, an important feature of Western discourse, was philosophically organized which resulted in demonization and denigration of "the other" in the episteme of the Western society (Young 15). In the process of othering the natives of the Northeast, what was natural and part of their everyday survival strategies was looked upon as "barbaric" and "savage" by the British administrators who placed the natives at the opposite end of civilization.

Although the pioneer works of the white missionaries are noteworthy as beneficial, the construct of "historiography has itself been a weapon of the colonial" (Nayar 53) which reflected itself in the historiography of the people inhabiting the northeast region of India as well because of the tendency that is "based on the us/them, I/they binary, where the European stood for the defining self and the native for the defined 'they'" (54). Moreover, the diversity of their cultures, ethnicities,

nature and belief practices was significantly eroded by conscious proselytization under the missionaries.

This attitude of the British administrators was fundamental to imperialist plans of expansion as it allowed them to have what Edward Said generally calls "positional superiority" (7) in their relationship with the natives. Thus, from the postcolonial perspectives and in the reiterative policy of their superiority over the natives, the natives became subjected to "the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness" (Bhabha *Location…* 94). This again worked a polarization among the natives who according to the colonizers, would remain divided within the colonial society, so that colonialism "would survive and reproduce itself" (M. Sharma 62). The natives are thus reduced to colonial stereotypes, relegated as they are to "a substitute and a shadow" (Bhabha *Location* ...117) in the "stereotypical knowledges" (118) of colonial discourse.

One of the first political moves adopted by the British administrators was the "civilizing mission" which ensued in disruption of the natives' way of life and governance. This policy was deployed uniformly throughout in most colonies. In the Northeast, different groups of people who had never been under the rule of one common administrator eventually came under the colonial rule through the use of weapons and violence, similar to British colonial expansion in Africa (Fanon 31). In terms of historiography, because the privilege of the written word rested with the administrators, the people living in the tribal regions came to be marginalized through the power of the written and printed form (Zama 13). As such, colonial historiography placed the natives at the periphery with the concept of binary oppositions at play, since the interest of colonial historiography was, in the words of Manorama Sharma, to "uphold colonialism" (64). In a similar context, Fanon talks about how colonial

historiography has painted a picture of the natives in general, saying: "the native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values" (33).

The natives of Northeast India are subjected to what Fanon in an African context calls an epistemic violence in the sense that apart from being placed at the periphery in colonial discourse, reliance on official documents and records of the British administrators by the latter historians has further exposed them to biases in historiography. With having no written records of their experiences by the people of the Northeast under British administrators, facts produced by these official records tended to be biased and questionable to a large extent. This is where many poets of the region have taken up the role of chroniclers of their history through their poetical works in the attempt to provide alternative history. This they have done through probing their myths and legends which often lends a sense of rootedness to their poetical works because there is an innate tendency among the people of northeastern India to "construct migration stories" to provide "the history and present distribution of the tribes" (Burling). Although these myths and legends may not be proper history, they do fill up the gaps in history, thereby providing, according to Baishali Baruah, an "alternative history challenging the 'official' history of modern India" (3); as the poet Dai has expressed in her poem "The Missing Link" (2002) about the official quest for the channel that linked Tsangpo and Brahmaputra by the Survey of India led by Noel Williamson during the nineteenth century (11, Glorious India). In the poem, the poet places the existence of the river Siang and asserts how it had been an integral part of the history of the Adi people but had been overlooked by the officials because, as the poet says: "there are no records" (14). In contrasting the absence of documents as valid records of the existence of a place or river with that

of the inability to locate the connecting channel by the surveyors, Dai claims the prevalence of traditional knowledge that has been handed down orally by adding:

> The river was the green and white vein of our lives
> Linking new terrain. (15-16)

It is true that prior to the British rule, many of the people of the Northeast had carried trade relations with their neighbours and in the process, dialects and languages were exchanged. When the British arrived at the Northeast, they hired people who could speak with the natives and learnt about them from the accounts provided to them. What the British had first come to the assumption of the natives was then, not first-hand knowledge per se but rather, formed from the descriptions given to him by others. Example maybe cited of the British adaptation of the term "Abors" which means "independent" for the people who called themselves "the Adi, or the hillsmen" (Elwin xv) from the Assamese neighbours. Thus, many official documents and anthropological studies of the administrators were bound to errors and misinterpretations.

Yet these possibilities are overlooked by the latter historians who continue to marginalize them indirectly through erroneous documents of the British administrators. In the poem "The Subaltern" (2011), the Assamese poet Jiban Narah acknowledges the partiality of historiography by portraying the callousness of a historian who despite the materials of the past he had dug up,

> Burst into laughter years after and sing:
> Cunning lads love naïve lasses
> History loves the dumb." (9-11)

The limitations of such callous historiography have not done justice to the "hero of history" or the people of the past whom the poet calls "the unreal men," leading the poet to conclude in dismay, that "none can close the count of lies of history."

Moreover, many feel that previous methods of historiography have "obscured historical processes that cross the borders of Northeast India" by its ignorance of the region's "colonial and post-colonial Others" (Pachuau 1). According to Manorama Sharma, this is the pitfall of colonial discourse: the fact that it "continued to influence the minds of the people long after colonialism as a political force came to an end" (64). With the Independence from the British in 1947, the people of the Northeast expected of better deals and sympathetic understanding of the disadvantaged people living in this part but rather than making attempts to fully understand them, the union authorities were guided by colonial historiography to force their policy and program.

Even during colonial period, the problem with administering the different tribes of Northeast India had been severely felt by the British administrators not only because of the differing geographical terrains but also because of the existing disparities among the different tribes of Northeast India in socio-political and religious way of life. During the nation-building process of the post- Independence era, the political requirements of Northeast India was neglected due to other pressing nation-wide emergencies; "even the demands for linguistic states were shelved by the Constituent Assembly" (Chaube 90). This, and the quick demarcation of lines that would separate ethnic communities across the entire Northeast region eventually led to occasional ethnic struggles which had hampered peace and harmony in the region. Since the early Independence period, there had been attempts to build nationalist fervor among the people of the Northeast which resulted in the adoption of

Jyotiprasad Saikia's epithet "seven sisters" as an "appropriate metaphor for bringing the seven north-eastern states psychologically closer to each other and to promote understanding amongst them" (Deka 6). This psychological bonding among the different tribes of the region was necessary especially during the process of nation-building because the strategic location of the northeastern states that had already been realized by the British administrators was felt by the nation builders as well.

However, the existence of a metaphoric slogan for fostering psychological bonding was not sufficient to overcome the challenges faced by the people who had, with the exception of Assam and Tripura, even during the national quest for freedom from the colonizers had not participated in the movement. According to Chaube, "a regional approach to the nation's problems was not contemplated at that stage" due mostly to "the absence of a thorough policy and knowledge in respect of the northeast" (90). Although various factors such as the disparity between the plains tribal and the hills tribal, religious factors and "the problem of the princely states" were noted, very little measures were taken towards finding the solution to solve these problems or come up with measures to foster better integration not only among the states but also with greater India.

There is no question of the bafflement of the newly- independent India towards the administration of the people of the Northeast. Having been distanced from it during the colonial rule, it would not have been an easy task to understand the region which has been dubbed as Hazarika had stated, as a "miniature Asia." Instead of making attempts to understand the diverse problems that has risen from this region, the independent India was quick to come to conclusion: that there was an uprising against the Indian state because the people of the Northeast (here, the

Nagas) were instigated by the missionaries to revolt against the Indian state. Under Nehru, all the missionaries who remained in the Northeast were forced to leave following the open dissent displayed by the Nagas during Nehru's speech in Kohima on March 1953 (Tochhawng 116-117). Having the options of governing the Northeast whether "politically or administratively/ militarily" (M. Baruah 29), the Northeast became "the earliest to have been brought under direct military administration (through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958)" (29). As commented by Nirmal Nibedon, "military action is not the final solution" (xiv) but the attempt at understanding the rise of "ethnic and racial self-consciousness" (xiv) that has even criss-crossed international boundaries. In the poem "Blood of Others" (2011), Temsula Ao has expressed the angst that was ensued by this awareness of what Nibedon calls "ethnic and racial self- consciousness"

> In the agony of re-birth
> Our hills and valleys reverberate
> With death-dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms
> As the throw-back generation resurrects. (69-72)

In this poem, Ao presents the scenario of the Nagas demand for autonomy from the Indian state in order to safeguard the "Naga way of life" in the early fifties (U. Misra 14). The problem with integration of the Northeast with other states of the country had always been attributed to the exclusion policy of the British during their administration in the hills and as discussed in the above, due to the influence of the missionaries. However, as Inoue has observed, the union government instead of formulating a different form of administration on the Northeast, relied on "the colonial policy of isolation and alienation" (20). This reliance on observations made by

state was not sufficient. In terms of the Naga demands, although the Indian state has made attempts at the "accommodat[ion] of the Naga revolt within the ambit of the Indian Constitution," there are unresolved issues that have not gained attention till date (U. Misra 14). Due to the apparent apathy of the nation-state towards the Northeast, many people of the Northeast have developed a sense of mistrust towards the Centre's developmental packages (16- 17). This has further distanced the people of integration because "a sense of incompability grew into one of resentment against being made a part of India" (21).

Cherrie L. Chhangte, a poet in Mizoram has pondered on this problem of integration among the citizens of India in her poem "What Does an Indian Look Like" (Misra 76). Critiquing the tendency to sensationalize the diversity of the nation, Chhangte states that

> differences, in theory, are appreciated;
> Make a good topic for the politician's speech" (5-6).

Yet the reality is that after more than seventy years of Independence that mark the departure of the British, not much has been done to foster integration among the Indians in order to minimize the disparity among the citizens of India. Saikat Guha echoes Chhangte's views in the essay "Quest for Another 'New Literature': Poetic Contours of Northeast India" by saying that "the popular slogan 'unity in diversity' is a mythic formulation, especially in the present context as the myth erases "difference" (76). The Northeast and its people, in the words of Chhangte, are still "sidelined, side-tracked and side-stepped" (15) because they form "a minority in a majority world" (16).

There had been "a demand for rectification of boundaries" (Zahluna 1235) as early as 1947 where, as in a report submitted by the Bordoloi subcommittee which was formed "to prepare schemes for the administration of North- Eastern Tribal Areas" (1235) by the Sixth Commission, there was "a feeling common to all of the Hill Districts …that people of the same tribe should be under a common administration" (Chaube 77). Thus, under the Sixth Constitution, "an administrative body which would be based on the concept of regional autonomy in all matters relating to customs, laws of inheritance, administration of justice, land, forests etc" was formed. Although the Sixth Constitution is fairly successful in its implementation of autonomy in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, creation of "disparity among the people living in those zones where a particular group has been granted the status of Autonomous Councils while others have been deprived" has led to "the rise of conflicts among different groups" (actionaid 25). Ethnic clashes in the Northeast 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" (Tohring xi). Yet it is not ethnic clashes alone that crippled Northeast India but there are other factors at play as well:

> The region has been the battleground for generations of subnational identities confronting insensitive nation-states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion.
>
> (Hazarika *Strangers of the Mist* xvi).

The ethnic clashes that occurred time and again in the Northeast had not received proper national attention and the cause had been greatly misunderstood.

Talking about Naga-Kuki conflicts, Tohring says that the ethnic movement has been misunderstood and misrepresented:

> Today, many of these movements in North-east are labeled as 'insurgencies' which means 'rising in revolt against an established authority.' It is incumbent for us to understand the significance of the term 'insurgency' while referring to the various political movements that took place during the British period and which are taking place ever since India's independence. (xiii)

Ethnic conflicts that have risen in the Northeast are not a "revolt against an established authority" because they do not identify themselves as revolts against the nation for other political propaganda but for the sole cause of asserting one's ethnic identity:

> All of [the leaders of these movements] did not regard themselves as 'insurgents'. They all talked about their country, nation, faith and culture in the sense of being a Naga, a Manipuri, or a Mizo. An attempt to preserve one's identity does not necessarily mean that he is an insurgent nor does an attempt to preserve one's independence …amounts to insurgency. (xiii)

Monalisa Changkija in her poem "Shoot" (2011), affirms the unity in the Naga's struggle for their ethnicity by stating that they are undaunted by the threats of guns pointed at them. Aware of the Centre's apathy for the people at the margins, she taunts the soldiers, telling them to "shoot, after all we are only an inconvenience of a few lakh souls" (16) and reaffirms their stand by ending her poem with the lines

Shoot, we will stand firm and not move

From our dreams of brotherhood. (28-29)

Many factors of dissent that had accumulated since the time of the British had vented out in recent times across the region in the forms of insurgency and violence. Even during the time of the British administrators, there was a pervasive feeling that the dissenting Naga tribes, here in Mackenzie's documentation the Angamis, would "break out into savagery" in resistance against the British law and order imposed on them (143). The British administrators then relied on strict administration over the people in order curb open protest of the colonial rule.

Without the attempt at understanding the "nature of ethnicity and ethnic groups…in terms of subjective experiences" (Nibedon xvi), military action was launched to curb the movements which, instead of pacifying the people, aggravated and confounded them. Failure to understand that the problems faced by the people of the Northeast is not merely political but "cultural, social, linguistic and economic in nature" (Tohring xii) has caused misrepresentations of the problems and their solutions. There is also the disagreement with terming these ethnic movements as "insurgency" as "an attempt to preserve one's identity does not necessarily mean that he is an insurgent nor does an attempt to preserve one's independence…amounts to insurgency" (xiii).

Nirmal Nibedon has written in the early 1980s that research findings had concluded that conflicts in Northeast India is due to "a conflict between the self assertion and the prevailing social economic and political situation" (xvi). Even during the 1980s, ethnic conflicts in the region was aggravated by the subjective experiences of the people:

> Socially, no group, big or small, is willing to lose its cultural identity and the phonotypical appearance of its people and hence there has been constant uprising against cultural assimilation and physical domination. (xvi).

The poems of Megan Kachari (b. 1967) reveal the emotions of a young man whose voice as an active ULFA Public Secretary had overshadowed the voice of a common man. Poignant with feelings of disenchantment and longing for normalcy, Kachari's poems open to a fragile world of a young man caught in between reality and dreams. The poem "The Wounded Search" (51) published in *Melodies and Guns* (2006) is where the poet reflects on the occasional helplessness felt by the militants:

> Day after day, into months, into years
> A life spent in exile, of blindness,
> The tip of my fingers, I pushed through the air
> To feel for you in the darkness. (1-4)

The poem ends with the realization that the futile search for his "motherland" was because he had been too blind to see that she had been waiting with "hands outstretched" (42), "since the ages,/ Through the darkness and light, through morning,/ through the night/…waiting, waiting" (41-43).

The key to understanding the socio-political mindset of the people is to understand the deeply ingrained ethnic roots while being aware of the disparities within each individual tribe. Falguni Rajkumar has noted four determinants of identity in Northeast India:

(i) The defined biological inherent attribute, which is not interchangeable

(ii) The indigenous native religion a clan or native follows, which is its metonym

(iii) The influence of universal religion, primarily Hinduism and Christianity, and lastly

(iv) The role played by the Governments, the Administration and politics of the region. (23)

Without understanding these determinants of identity in the region, there are limitations in the various developmental process of the Northeast. One of the most common and serious misunderstandings of the people of the Northeast is that it is a homogenous entity. This has subjected the people of the Northeast to stereotypical bias and the perception of the people of the Northeast as a homogenous whole has led to the failure of identifying the uniqueness of each tribe in the region. Poets of the region have responded to this perception of homogeneity by asserting the individuality of their respective ethnicities. Aruni Kashyap through his poem "Me" (2011) asks to tell his stories to anyone who would listen. Claiming his own history as representative of his people, he says:

My history is different, defined

by grandmas, rivers, hills,

singing spring birds behind green trees

and seventeen victories.

My words: they have legends in them. (24- 28)

Kashyap's poem is an example of the attempt of poets who seek to subvert stereotypical biases and homogeneity by reclaiming their history through their myths and legends. Reflecting on the subject- matters of the poetry produced in the region, Baishali Baruah states that "the political dimension has a heavy stake on the literature forcing the articulation of polyphonic voices that attest to the multiple reality of the North-east" (3).

Apart from this, the perception of homogeneity among the tribes of India has adverse effects in the administration of the region in that needs peculiar to a certain tribe or group of people are ignored or certain developmental strategies do not befit the people, as observed by Deka

> India adopted a developmental strategy under a model centred on heavy industry but this model ignored the need of a region like the North-east suffering from infrastructural bottleneck. (6)

This has led to disillusionment of the people of the Northeast towards the Union government which has aggravated psychological distance between the region and the nation-states, evident in Tohring's observation:

> Observers feel that this lack of attention shows that the region is not one of the nation's top priorities. The centre's responses to problems in the North-East has been characterized by knee-jerk reactions and short-term solutions though 47 years have passed since independence, no effort has been made to evolve a policy that would take care of the special need of the region. The problems of the North-east are not merely political but also cultural, social, linguistic and economic in nature. (xii)

Tohring's suggestion of Northeast India requiring a policy that would suit to the "special need of the region" is an age-old requirement that the nation-state has not been able to formulate. This is because the tendency to place the diverse Northeast under one umbrella term has led to one or another groups of people becoming side-lined (B. Baruah 3). Having stated before, the Northeast is not a homogenous whole and its requirements for progress and development are as diverse as the cultural, geographical, economic and political differences that exist among the people who inhabit the region. Moreover, the nation's peace talks have not given due regard to the "third voice" who constitute the smaller ethnic groups. Not only has their voice been muted, but their opinion "is always taken for granted" (Mahanta 103). In fact, peace talks tend to concentrate on the "the will of the majority which exercises state power" (103) that does not allow the interests of the minority to be heard. This has created tensions in the society where more than one communities live together. According to Mahanta, the nation's peace talks, as seen in the negotiation of the nation with ULFA, are concentrated on placating the dissenting parties without consideration for other groups of people living in the same state.

With the Independence of India in 1947, the majority of the Northeast people who had for a long time been under the administration of the British suddenly found themselves in the position of administrators, were faced with the role of leaders and workers of the state. The emergence of stepping into state politics meant that many politicians and party workers did not receive grass-root sensitization which had brought about rampant corruption along the region. This has led to misuse of power and privileges, causing a divide between common people and party- sympathizers. Addressing to the problem of corruption and misuse of power in his state Tripura, Chandrakanta Murasingh in his poem "Of a Minister" (2011) satirizes the minister

who in the poem is a representative of political leaders, stating that there is no substance in the words spoken by the minister:

> The minister has neither inside, nor outside,
>
> No air, no fertile soil on a sandbank.
>
> There are only words, call of a hundred open roads,
>
> Pulling at the sleeves day and night. (16-19)

It is in this scenario that calls for the "third voice" that poets become, in the words of Nongkynrih, "chroniclers of subjective realities" who represent a region that has been "striving to reach out to the rest of the world from its historically and geographically marginalized position" (T. Misra xxix). That "the fissures within the modern nation state and its hegemonic project has clearly led to the reinforcement of ethnic voices" (B. Baruah 3) is apparent as the poets "define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures" (Baral x).

Accepting that creative writers are "chroniclers of subjective realities," poets have written of "the lives that they know" and "want to share with the world." They have spoken of their experiences of horror at violence, corruption, government apathy and other everyday issues of living in a region that has been largely neglected. However, reading poetry in the context of violence and terror has limited the boundaries and scope of the poems. Many anthologies that have published collection of writings from the Northeast seemed to have selected writings that echo such subject matter. The content of poems written by the Northeast poets is not different from poetry written around the world. Mamang Dai (2011) writes:

> There is conflict and there is tranquility [in poetry written by the Northeast poets]. This must be like everywhere else in the world. And like anywhere else, moving through this landscape, there is a band of people struggling with pen and paper and, let's say, lyrics of songs and verse, to express their feelings. (225)

It is mainly due to the recurrent reading of Northeast poetry as the voice of violence and terror that today it is necessary to read poetry of the Northeast as "poetry of resistance " not only as an "alternative history challenging the 'official' history of modern India" but also against such critical practice positing literary outputs from the Northeast as "exotic" and to assert the literary value of writings from the region. Although political and social resistance to any institution or ideology is more powerful and demanding, poetic resistance is more subtle and provides a wider, more humane appeal which is equally important. Poetic resistance seeks to go deeper than history and into orality and apart from raising resistance, it also claims the pre-historic identity; giving the poets the impetus to look into their ethnicity. Poetic resistance is a resistance that does not ask for immediate answers but is a narrative of recurring sense of resistance that has stabilized itself for many generations.

The second chapter titled "Poetry and the Political Space" examines how the poets have responded to historical bias by providing "alternative histories" through their poetical works. Provision of alternate histories amidst discursive reiterative colonial historiography involves intellectual exercise of recognizing the multifaceted loss of one's culture, religion, and cultural signifiers that entails the reclamation of their indigenous land, assertion of native intelligence and religion.

The third Chapter of the thesis titled "Poetry as a Site for the Marginalized Human" deals with the examination of the voices of people who have been marginalized by the structure of different establishments and is a comparative reading of the differences in the experiences of men and women. The Fourth Chapter is titled "Claiming Ethnic Identity." The chapter is a study on the presentation of ethnic identity through poetical works in order to assess the extent to which poets have been successful in the assertion of their ethnic identity by studying their voices of resistance in the contemporary times.

For the purpose of the study, an interdisciplinary approach has been taken to formulate coherent conclusion through the employment of theories on Postcolonialism, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Cultural Studies including Comparative Literary Studies have been relied on in order to come to a coherent conclusion.

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CHAPTER TWO

POETRY AND THE POLITICAL SPACE

Prior to the advent of British colonialism in Northeast India in the nineteenth century, there were communities who already had established literature and had their written history preserved, such as the Assamese community where the Ahom kingdom had been established by the Shans of Burma in the 13th century (Inoue 16) or the Meitei community whose indigenous literature had gone through its encounter with Hinduism (T.K Singh 144). The other communities in the Northeast like the Khasi, Mizo, Naga and those in Arunachal Pradesh who relied on oral tradition were yet to formulate their own literature and the absence of which during the colonial encounter in the nineteenth century led to their subjugation through colonial historiography.

In a detailed analysis of historiographical bias in the Northeast, Manorama Sharma states that the nineteenth century historiography was influenced by "the development of capitalism and the gradual expansion of colonialism" (63). The glorified scientific progress and development of the nineteenth century England was thus opposed against the pauperized natives of the Northeast in colonial historiography. In fact, the development of historiography throughout the years has been influenced by "the emergence of every dominant socio-economic system" (63). In case of the Northeast, the dominant socio-economic system belonged to the British administrators. With no written records of their experiences by the people of the Northeast under British administrators during those times, facts produced by these official records tended to be biased and questionable to a large extent.

Since recent past, dominance of "interest groups" who would rather "depend on keeping the Northeast's image as one of despondency" (A. Sharma 10) have also

misrepresented this image to a certain degree for their own benefits. Indeed, what one gathers about the region have been accounts given by visitors or officials working in the region; often leading to the voices of the local people remaining unheard (Das 5). In terms of poetical works, there have been responses made to this misrepresentation by various poets who have retrieved from their mythic past symbols and incidents in order to provide a counter- discourse against this misrepresentation, while at the same time questioning "the concept of homogenous North East…in the face of the heterogeneous reality of the area in terms of culture, history, ethnicity, language and literary traditions" (Baruah 2).

Nongkynrih challenges the prevalent discourse that has presented the Khasi as "the bravest and most warlike of all the tribes of India" (Reid 3) as he celebrates the beauty of the Khasi Hills and Kynshi, the largest river of Meghalaya that flows into Bangladesh in the poem "Kynshi" (2011), by juxtaposing the natural beauty of his state with that of historiography, as if to contrast the idea that beauty and barbarism are not synonymous with each other, saying

> There is much beauty here.
> I see nothing of the head-hunters
> Who value life, they say
> less than a pipe of tobacco. (27-30)

In fact, in his Prelude to *Around the Hearth* (2007), a collection of Khasi legends by Nongkynrih himself, the poet differentiates the Khasi from the other tribes in the region by recalling that "Enlightenment did not come to them with schools and colleges" (vii). This is indeed a blatant resistance to the British administrators' claim that the Khasi youths were capable of working in government offices after

having been educated under the Welsh missionaries who "learned the strange language, and reduced it to a writing, prepared a grammar and vocabulary, introduced a printing press and opened schools" (Reid 3). Nongkynrih asserts that the Khasi "knew how to make things out of wood and iron; they knew trade and commerce" (vii) even before the advent of missionaries in their land. In his book *Hill Politics in Northeast India* (2016), Chaube also attests to Nongkynrih's counter- discourse by talking about how different tribes in the Northeast had trade relations with their neighbours prior to the advent of the British (30-31). While acknowledging that "their tools were primitive," Chaube claims that "their skills were not" (31). Passah has also spoken about the iron industry in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills which was "originally of considerable importance" because it was with which the people carried their trade with outsiders since "the ore was preferred to English iron by Bengali blacksmiths because of its malleability and being more easily worked" and which "has been excavated by these tribes long before colonial rule" (68).

In "A Day in Cherrapunjee: V" (1992), the poet Nongkynrih talks about the legend of Khoh Ramhah, the giant who fell into the waterfall after being made to swallow a concoction made by the people because he "terrorized people like an evil spirit" (32). In the poem, the poet describes the "market days" of "Cherra in the days of Ramhah/ before the white men came," describing it as a commercial "booming town" whose noise "carried all the way, they say,/ to the foothills of Bangla." (10-15). Through the above lines in the poem, Nongkynrih shows that the Khasi had all along a relatively good trade relations with their neighbours, which testifies that the Khasi were not as isolated as they had been presented in official documents. Udayon Misra says that of all the tribes in the Northeast, the Khasis and Jaintais were the only ones "who had a moderately developed economy" especially the Khasis

who engaged in "vigorous trade with the plains of Assam and with present- day Bangladesh" (200:1). The relationship of the people of Meghalaya with those at the borders of Bangladesh went beyond economic enterprise, as suggested by Kharmawphlang. In the poem "The Conquest" (2011), Kharmawphlang mentions the inter-marriages that took place between them:

> Long ago, the men went beyond the
> Surma
> to trade, to bring home women
> to nurture their seed. (8-11)

In terms of historiography, because the privilege of the written word rested with the administrators, the people living in the Northeast came to be marginalized through the power of the written and printed form. As such, colonial historiography placed the natives at the periphery with the concept of binary oppositions at play, since the interest of colonial historiography was to "uphold colonialism" (Sharma 64). In this regard, Fanon talks about how colonial historiography has painted a picture of the natives:

> The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. (33)

According to colonial hierarchy, the absence of written word among the natives signified their lack of civilization and depravation while the presence of written/printed word asserted the rights of the colonists over the method of history writing. In the fluent adventurous words of the colonists' pen, colonial salvation entailed in the "natives being freed from despotic rule, raised from their ignorance, and saved from cruel and barbarous practices" (Sharpe 100). It is important for

colonial discourse to politicize historiography for, as Fanon had mentioned, though forming the governing rule, they still are the "foreigners" and "the others" in the land that they have colonized and appropriated (31). Thus, for the assertion of their superiority over the natives and their military strength, the colonizers adopted violence and masked themselves with confidence and courage. Likewise, colonial historiography became politicized in the hands of the British colonizers for it gave them the impetus towards their imperial attitudes, as discussed by John McLeod, who credits the success of colonial discourse to its enabling of the feeling of supremacy of the colonizers at the cost of the degradation of the colonized "by enabling them to derive a new sense of self-worth through their participation in the furthering the 'progress' of 'civilisation' (represented, of course, squarely in Western terms)" (38).

In the present day of postcolonial reawakening, poets like Nongkynrih and Kharmawphlang have sought to rewrite historiography through their poetry by going back to their myths and legends in order to prove that as a group of people, the Khasi had their own history prior to colonialism. Nongkynrih's narration of Ramhah's fate establishes the presence of a distinct village court where the well-being of the members of a society was central. This is an important reclamation of their history because it is a proof that Khasi society already had its distinct form of jurisdiction that involved the entire community, which also established the presence of civilization of its own. Likewise, Kharmawphlang's description of the inter-marriages that took place between the Khasi and the women of Surma challenges the representation of the Khasi as "savage tribe." Acknowledging that there indeed were "wars and bloodshed," Nongkynrih in his introduction to *Around the Hearth* says that the Khasi "wanted peace and togetherness with other people" (vii) as with Nature since they were all equal, being the creations of God (viii). Highlighting the inter- marriages between two

people is an indirect assertion of the close relationship that existed between people of the Khasi hills and Surma plains. Moreover, in referring to the concoction made by the people of Cherra for Ramhah the giant to drink, the poet also hints at traditional knowledge of medicine that the people were aware of, which provides a counter-discourse against the prevalent discourse that relegated the Khasi people as uneducated by providing proof of the existence of indigenous knowledge.

Most of the selected poets are invariably university- educated. Their access to higher learning and worldwide churning for reclaiming cultural identity has emboldened their investigations to recover appreciations of the past, if not revive the old customs. The tribes of the Naga, with the same colonial history as the Khasi tribe had also been under the subjugation of colonial historiography. Like the poets of the Khasi tribes, Ao has taken the role of a historian through her poem "Stone-People from Lungterok" (1992) by documenting the history of the Ao- Naga through Lungterok myth, out of which the Ao- Nagas believe to have emerged from, against colonial historiography by providing information of her people that might have been "excluded by the grand narrative of modern historiography" (Baruah 3). Through the poem, Ao provides "an alternative history" that reveals the ingenuity of the pre-colonized people who were "knowledgeable/ In birds' language/ and animal discourse" (16- 18). Ao portrays the different characters of an Ao-Naga as "the poetic and politic/ Barbaric and balladic/ Finders of water/ And fighters of fire" (10-13) whom she calls "Gentle lovers and savage heroes./ Builders of home and destroyer of villages" (40-41).

Ao's poem is replete with the duality of characters that are in stark contrast to each other but are inherent of an Ao-Naga. By her character sketch of the Ao-Naga, Ao here provides a different portrayal of her people. In her reiteration of

contrasting images throughout the poem, Ao gives the impression of binary opposition to which colonialism had relegated the tribal community by claiming both ends of the binaries: that her people are both "savage and sage" (54) or "singers of songs and takers of hearts" (39). In doing so, Ao does not only appropriate colonial history but has also added elements to colonial history by asserting the other end of binaries that had been neglected in colonial historiography, thus subverting the idea of civilization as represented in Western terms.

Having been placed at the extreme end of progress and civilization, poets have contested against this representation of themselves by providing insights into what colonialism meant to them, thus providing another voice from the other end of colonialism. Kharmawphlang's poem 'The Conquest' (2011) gives a look at British administration from the native's viewpoint, saying:

> Later came the British
> With gifts of bullets, blood-money
> And religion
> A steady conquest to the sound of
> Guns began (12-16)

Kharmawphlang's poem attests to the strategy of violence applied by the colonizers in their conquest of lands. Not only that, he contests the colonizers' ideology of savagery and civilization by revealing the tactics employed by them in order to place the colonized under subjugation: through bullets, blood-money and religion. The poem directly questions the attribution of "corrosive element" to the natives in colonial discourse by highlighting the "corrosive elements" brought to their hills by the British. The poet goes on to reaffirm that it was only after the British

left that peace ensued and the air of their hills was filled once again with "the sweet/ Smell of wet leaves." What the corresponding lines suggest is how Western civilization has compounded the natives' ways of life in their close affinity to nature: the sweet smell of wet leaves returned to them only after the departure of the British.

Ao's description of colonial intrusion into their territory shows the difference in their experiences from the Khasis who, like the Ao-Nagas were Christianized by the missionaries. Yet, unlike the violence that Kharmawphlang talks about, the Ao-Nagas experienced colonialism through the pioneering works of missionaries, hence the absence of images of guns and wars; as she writes of the encounter between them in the poem "Blood of Others" (2011):

> Then came a tribe of strangers
> Into our primordial territories
> Armed only with a Book and
> Promises of a land called heaven. (13- 16)

Ao's choice of the word "tribe" to describe the missionaries is a direct subversion of the politics of historiography. In calling the white missionaries "tribes," Ao subverts the traditional colonial idea of "tribe." By referring the term back to the missionaries who formed the smaller group in the encounter, Ao consciously resists historiography by asserting theirs as the dominant culture, for the missionaries were foreigners intruding into their indigenous land. Depiction of the weapons the missionaries had brought alongwith them is not a mere representation of their messages. Ao here presents a violent discourse where the apparent harmlessness of "only a Book" (15) which is the Bible and the promises of a land given by word of

mouth without physical existence is soon contrasted with the proselytizing mission work in the following lines. Moreover, the irony of the promises of a land called heaven that was made to the natives and the subsequent incursion of the British administration into their territory is being consciously highlighted as well. Despite the peaceful intrusion into their territory, Ao's poem reflects the epistemic violence that the contact with the white missionaries brought to her culture, as she goes on to talk about the lasting effects of this encounter:

> We borrowed their minds,
> Aped their manners,
> Adopted their gods
> And became perfect mimics. (45- 48)

In describing the colonial intrusion into their indigenous land, the poet has accounted for the history of the contact between the missionaries and the Ao-Nagas. By doing so, the poet has not represented the clash between the British administrators and other Naga tribes, such as the Angamis who vehemently resisted against foreign incursion into their territories (Mackenzie 115). Thus the history of colonial intervention during the nineteenth century portrayed by Ao is reflective of the Ao- Nagas and not the other Naga tribes. This is where the individuality of the poet as a member of the Ao-Naga community surfaces against the notion of the greater Naga identity; similar to her claim of emerging from the mythical Lungterok which is the Ao- Nagas belief of their genesis. Yet this does not segregate the poet from the greater Naga identity which she asserts towards the end of the poem where the poet brings in the voices of resistance that stands for the greater Naga identity.

The history of British administration among the Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is, to quote P.K. Nayak, "replete with the policy of pressure and compromise" (553). There was a strong resistance of British administration by the locals between 1893- 94 that resulted in two expeditions of the Abor Hills where villages opposing the British administration were burnt. Although Dai mentions the incident of how villages opposing the British were ravaged in her novel *Legends of Pensam* (2006), her poems reflect very little of it. In the poem "The Obscure Place" (2011), Dai mentions about the colonial contact, saying:

> Yesterday we gave shelter to men
> who climbed over our hills
> for the glory of a homeland, they said. (12- 14)

Drawing most of her materials from racial memory, Dai does not address the violence with which the British administrators had ruled the Abor Hills in her poems. However, there are images alluding to war in "River Poems" (2004) where Dai brings in the images of "foot soldiers," "armour," and "an army" (13-15) and in "Remembrance" (2004) where the poet mentions

> The footfall of soldiers is drowned and scattered.
> In the hidden exchange of news we hear
> that weapons are multiplying in the forest. (12-14).

Throughout the poems the poet has not indicated the timeline of this incident of terror. Thus the lines are reminiscent of two events: firstly, the contacts of the British and the Adi tribes, who were then known as the Abors (Elwin xv). When a British officer had come to their land with gifts, he was killed by an Adi man who felt insulted by the other men who had accompanied the officer. The British

administrators, intending to avenge the death of their officer, sent in their soldiers ensuing in the Adi's surrender to the British troops (Dai *Pensam* 53). Secondly, the lines are also reminiscent of the 1962 Indo-China War where peaceful lives of the innocents were disrupted ensuing in the storage of these images of war and violence in the racial memory of her people. In these lines, the poet Dai has displayed both her awareness of systematic and epistemic violence where systematic fear of war and its results is imprinted in the minds of people through narration.

As seen in the above, poets of the region have taken up the role of chroniclers of their history by subverting the previous written word and providing alternative voices through their poems. In doing so, the poets have reclaimed their histories that had been "annihilated" by colonial historiography. To the poets writing in English, many of their poems become, to qoute Temsula Ao, "an alternative history challenging the 'official' history of modern India" (Baruah 3). In such act, the art of poetry writing becomes a highly political act with the poets themselves taking up the role not only of creative writers but also of historians who become responsible to provide "alternative history" of their people. Speaking of the permeating political nuances in poetry, Monalisa Changkija, an eminent journalist from Nagaland, affirms the importance of poetry writing:

> In the Northeast, there are many things one cannot write as a journalist. I have had my experiences while doing so, and then I found poetry is also another vehicle to express one's anger and protest. (Zama: 141)

In a similar cultural conditioning under the colonists of Australia, Sally Morgan, an Australian Aborigine had written in a 1987 poem titled "My place" that she needed to "write the history of my own family" because "a lot of our history

has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything" (163). Similarly, poets of the Northeast have answered to "the need to write private and communal histories independent of European ones" (Nayar 56).

In the poem "Blood of Others," (2011) Temsula Ao talks about the disruption of their lives as missionaries entered into their territory. The missionaries came to them "armed with only a Book and/ Promises of a land called Heaven." Ao continues to talk about the ensuing confusion of her people as the missionaries taught to undo their indigenous religion and practices and embrace the new religion, Christianity:

> We stifled our natural articulations
> Turned away from our ancestral gods
> And abandoned accustomed rituals
> Beguiled by the promise of a new heaven. (40-44)

The forces that led to the corrosion of the indigenous was not only bullets and dishonest money but also religion. Claiming difference from indigenous religions and worship practices, the British colonizers (here the missionaries) continued with their concept of dichotomy by subverting indigenous religions and glorifying their religion. Criticizing the white Church of the colonists, Fanon is of the opinion that the Church was one of the oppressors:

> The Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. (32)

Homi K. Bhabha has discussed the role of the Church in political reform. He explores Charles Grant's "dream of an evangelical system of mission education" and arrives at the conclusion that Grant's vision was to "construct a

particularly appropriate form of colonial subjectivity" (124). Considering the fact that the British administrators left most of the "civilizing task" to the missionaries in the Northeast, Grant's idea of subverting the natives through the teachings of the Church seemed to be at play in the British's governance of Northeast India.

In her study of the historiography of Christianity in Northeast India, Manorama Sharma notices a recurring pattern among the native writers who belong to different states and different denominations: none of the writers have "addressed themselves to the philosophies of Christian historiography" (41). Typically, Christian historiography would deal with critical assessments of changes in theology and provide insights into "a critique of the Christian philosophy of history." Sharma points out that the so-called History of the Church or History of Christianity in the Northeast offers very little to the philosophy of history since they are "descriptive and chronological accounts of the coming of the different Christian denominations to this region and their evangelical work" (42). Most of these writers reveal their disposition towards Christianity as an essential "divine plan" of God and hence never questioned it. This common feature in the early writings of the history of Christianity in Northeast India by the native writers depict the success of Grant's vision of subverting the minds of the natives through the Church.

Despite the compliant acceptance of Christianity as a harbinger of modernity and change by the early native historians, in recent times poets of the region have questioned the validity of the teachings of the Church at the cost of their indigenous faith and beliefs which were once part of their intrinsic identity. When it was no longer bullets that conquered them, it was the Bible that conquered them through its teachings of subservience and obedience. In "Letter from Pahambir," Kharmawphlang narrates their journey from the city to a village to meet its Chief to learn from him.

There is a hint of degeneration of the power of the church when he describes the scene as they passed by the church:

We have left the church far behind,
Glowing strangely in pallid
Arrogance, through the dust kicked up
By our passing. (4-7)

The image of the travelers travelling from a city to a village searching for "wisdom" as opposed to "wisdom of falsehood" (18) not from a pastor or a priest but from a village Chief conveys the urge to return to indigenous knowledge.

Temsula Ao has also questioned the validity of the Biblical Sermon on the Mount in her poem "Blessings" (1988) where she has presented the illogical teachings in the Bible with her present reality:

Blessed are the poor,
In rags,
For they shall inherit
The crumbs
From the rich
Who knowing no hunger
Cannot savour
Of their plenty
Through they possess
The granaries of the earth. (1-10)

Thus through poetry written by different poets of Northeast India, the shift from the compliant acceptance of faith to that of contest is apparent to a degree of disbelief in the gospel. In questioning their adopted religion, the poets dispose a

modernist tendency of questioning establishments in order to look for spaces to deconstruct.

The colonial world was not interested in frontier building alone; in the belief of its discourse the natives were but poor, pitiful people whose primitive ways needed to be shifted towards modernity. While the abolition of chieftainship was crucial in order to thwart native resistance, colonial rule also led to the abolition of many other cultural signifiers that are crucial to the identity and cultural formations of the natives. In the poem "the Obscure Place" (2011), Dai talks about the loss of their "sleeping houses," or their cultural dormitories , a crucial building block to the community, common among most tribes in the Northeast. However, the result of the result of the natives' gullibility and the colonists' shrewdness in their encounter with each other produced a "stony" presence of the men of the land:

> Yesterday we gave shelter to men
> who climbed over our hills
> for glory of a homeland, they said-
> those who know what knowing is,
> And now the sleeping houses, the men and the villages
> Have turned to stone. (12-17)

For most tribal communities, "sleeping houses" or dormitories were important cultural institutions. They served not only as educational institutions where each member of the community upon reaching a certain age was an inmate until marriage to be trained according to the customs of the society, but also as social adjustment and recreation. However, the contact with the colonial world and the ushering in of "modernity" have brought these dormitories to irrevocable decline.

To the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, dormitories were an important institution where "the socio-cultural life was very much shaped by the codes and conducts… of the youth dormitory" (Sonowal 312). In the above poem, Dai laments the decline of this institution as the once vibrant culture of the dormitory has been rendered inactive, "turned to stone."

What is revealed through these poems is the lack of colonial understanding towards the people they were coming into contact with. Cecil Beadon, then the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal remarked in 1862 that one of the British endeavours was "to introduce among them civilization and order." Manorama Sharma criticizes this supposedly "achievements" of the colonizers for there was no "questioning whether the colonial people needed such 'achievements' or not" (65). Overlooking many intrinsic cultural signifiers, the British administrators had compelled the natives to change in accordance with their idea of progress and development with no concern of what such actions resulted in the minds of the natives. Without their cultural signifiers, the natives eventually lost themselves and were caught in confusion:

Stripped of all our basic certainties
We strayed from our old ways
And let our soul-mountain recede
Into a tiny ant-hill and we

Schooled our minds to become
The ideal tabula rasa
On which the strange intruders
Began scripting a new history. (Ao: 2011 33-40)

Worldwide, the colonial rule subverted the minds of the natives to such an extent that they began to "internalize the language of the Empire as representing the natural, true order of life" (McLeod 19). Ao's usage of images like "soul-mountain" and "tabula rasa" in the above poem are implications of the internalization of Western education and school of thoughts. Such internalization of colonial rule was an essential means to "disempowering" the natives who were "taught to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves" (McLeod 19); a strategy employed by the British to "produce natives who had assimilated the white man's values" (Nayar 55). In such situations, the natives became irrevocably lost:

> The words of strangers have led us into a mist
> deeper than the one we left behind
> weeping. (Dai:Misra: 6)

Disempowerment of the natives from their very selves made them become their own worst enemies as they had begun to forsake their essence, as Kharmawphlang has admitted in the poem "Letter from Pahambir" (1993):

> We have suckled for so long
> on a wisdom of falsehood- we are ourselves
> our own worst enemies. (17-19)

It is interesting to note the imperialist plan of colonial extension in Northeast India. With the rise of national consciousness in other parts of India, one of the objectives of the British administrators was to maintain a stronghold in the North-east. This they did so by applying different tact to the people. Manorama Sharma points out C.J Lyall's avowal of the British imperialist plan of winning the confidence of the people of the Khasi Hills and thereby brought "prosperity and

civilization" (67) during their contact with the people. Indeed, earlier British official documents boasted of the changes in the people of the Khasi Hills:

> Sixty years ago the Khasias, who are the bravest and most warlike of all the tribes of India, were more bloodthirsty than the Lushais. .. In [Colonel Lister's] time, Welsh missionaries entered the [Khasi] hills, learned the strange language, and reduced it to a writing, prepared a grammar and vocabulary, introduced a printing press and opened schools.
>
> Now the Khasias are running the Bengalis a close race as clerks and accountants in the cutcherries (Government offices) at Shillong; …their foremost youths are aspiring to University degrees; and in female education they are officially stated to take lead of all the Indian races. (Reid 3)

In the *1835 Minute on Indian Education*, Macaulay had proposed the formation of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Ashcroft 375). Colonial hierarchy was successful in creating "a Westernized native" (Nayar 45), deeply ingrained in the socio-ideological construct of colonialism. Kharmawphlang has brought out the disruptive consequences of such construct among his people by claiming that Western education was a "wisdom of falsehood" and abandonment of indigenous knowledge have made themselves their own worst enemies in the above quoted poem "Letter from Pahambir" (2011).

One of the many differences that ensued in friction between the colonial power and the natives of the Northeast is the sense of possession towards the land. To the natives, the land is not just their home or where they receive their source of sustenance but part of their existence, to which they are intrinsically bonded. According to the Ao-Naga creation myth, the Ao-Naga had emerged out of the six

stones called Lungterok and this creation myth has been revisited by Temsula Ao in the poem "Stone- People from Lungterok" (1992):

LUNGTEROK,
The six stones
Where the progenitor
And forebear
Of the stone-people
Born
Out of the womb of the earth. (1-7)

In narrating the origin myth of the Ao- Naga, Ao provides what Nayar calls "[her] own oral myths and form of storytelling as a counter to the colonial, European narratives" wherein she seeks to subvert the historiography of her people by bringing out "communal histories independent of European ones" (56). Similarly, as an alternate history of her people, in the poem "Birthplace" (2004) Dai mentions the Adi creation myth:

We are the children of the rain
of the cloud woman,
brother to the stone and bat…
…
The first drop of water
gave birth to man. (1-7; 16-17)

The land inhabited by the people of the Northeast also provides them with testaments of their history, for they remain part of the unchanging natural world, as mentioned by Kharmawphlang in his "Umiam" (1995) poem:

Stones, scattered in the shallows
around my feet, describing
tales on the shore. (1-3)

These stones that describes the tales on the shore are important identity markers to the poet because they are part of the "indigenous history" of the land, a form of "material artefacts…from [the] past so that [the poet] can narrate their own histories" (Nayar 57). This so done, is part of the attempt to rewrite their own history which had been annihilated by colonial historiography. There is an indisputable closeness with their land seen through the poems. To the poet Ao, there is something to be learnt from objects of nature such as the mountain that seems to hold a "secret/ Unknown,/ And a majesty/ Untouched/ By man" (4-8). However, as she has found after ascending the top of the mountain, that "there is after all/ No secret/ On the mountain" (Lesson of the Mountain 29-30):

Standing there
You become aware
Of a loftiness
In the sky
And an expanse
In the horizon
Beyond the reach
Of the highest mountain. (35-42)

There is a deep sense of respect attributed to nature around them. The belief that nature holds wisdom beyond the understanding of man is reiterated in the poems. When portraying the bafflement of the people due to the short visit of the

Prime Minister I.K Gujral in 1997 to discuss peace in Shillong, Nongkynrih ends his poem attributing wisdom to nature:

> Only the bamboos watched in silence
> too used to the antics of men. (35-36)

Likewise, in Dai's poem "The Balm of Time," there are projections of the elements of nature in the form of the jungle, the fatal wind, the mountain, the sky winds and the rain as an omniscient entity. According to Dai, these elements of nature possess in them power that is beyond the reach of man:

> Whispering, the fatal wind appoints everything.
> Staking a claim a twig or a fern
> will foretell destiny. (10-12)
> …
> the rain knows
> how the life of man can be measured
> in the span of a song. (26-28)

Dai's description reveals people's indigenous knowledge at an intimate awareness which was not available to foreigners. One of the most important preoccupations of the indigenous historian or archaeologist is "to retrieve indigenous knowledge" which though unaccounted for in the imperialist notion of "truth" as proven by scientific knowledge, provides a "fine source of history" as "coded into local legend or folklore" (Nayar 57). In the present age, this indigenous knowledge, especially that of indigenous ecological knowledge has been "increasingly recognized as a form of rational and reliable knowledge developed through generations of intimate contact by native peoples with their lands, which has equal status with

scientific knowledge" (Rai 248). In the poem "River Poems" (2004), Dai establishes the wisdom of tribal culture by acknowledging the close proximity of man and nature, saying:

> Without speech
> we practiced a craft,
> leaving imprints on sky walls
> linking the seasons
> coding the trailing mist,
> in silent messages
> across the vast landscapes. (1-7)

Thus the land occupied by the natives is the land out of which they were formed, where they shared kinship with nature and from where they receive their inspirations from. Apart from all these, land, to the natives also implies dignity. Yet to the British, it was a natural barrier that worked for the expansion of their enterprise. According to S.K. Chaube, the British were initially interested in the prospects of "cotton, wild rubber and wild tea" in Assam which was followed by coal-mining and petroleum- drilling. Later on, the seven states of the Northeast eventually came under the British rule due to "pressing political necessity" (6). This political move was favorable not only to their colonial enterprise but to their want of power for there already was nationalist movements in other parts of the British-occupied India. As the Northeast region was annexed, the British administrators mapped the country with boundary lines while the natives were accustomed to mark demarcation of lands through engravements or natural formations such as gorges and rivers, seen in Dai's poem "Tapu" (2004):

> Here we have marked the land

with upright branches and stones,
and consecrated territory
with song, and the leap of the warrior
returning triumphant. (1-5)

The use of engravements as markers was sufficient for the natives who were accustomed to verbal agreements, wherein the settlement of disputes of land between two brothers were marked, reflected by Dai in "The Missing Link" (2004):

in a lust for land brother and brother
claiming the sunrise and the sunset,
in a dispute settled by the rocks
engraved in a vanished land. (17-22)

In the essay "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India," Tilottoma Misra highlights the difference of opinion regarding written/verbal word between the natives and the imperialists. To the imperialists, the written word was "equated to modernity and progress" while orality was equated to "primitive, traditional, magical world" (21). To the natives, however, the written word was "exalted" as it was considered to be "infinite, indestructible and fluid" (Ibid). Thus the meeting between two opposing civilizations brought about much conflict but out of which conflict the party that had access to the written and printed word emerged stronger, reducing the other party without one to the "primitive," "barbarous" and "backward."

Yet the poets continue to contest this view of backwardness and primitivism inherent to the Northeast in their poems. In the poem "Stone- People from Lungterok" (1992), Ao takes up the role of an anthropologist, presenting the Ao-Naga people as

the primitive "stone-people" that they were during colonial contacts in the nineteenth century. Attributing the characteristics of "the Polyglots" (14) to her people, she brings out the formation of indigenous knowledge in the past prior to the advent of education in the nineteenth century. She dismisses the perception of the tribal community as backward and uncivilized by bringing to fore their intrinsic relationship with the uncorrupted nature that had imparted knowledge to the indigenous people while also subtly refuting Western education by privileging native knowledge which could understand even the language of birds and animals. Moreover, the poet seeks to dismantle the idea of head-hunting as barbarous act by highlighting that head-hunting was more than mere sports as connoted by the term but rather, was "trophies/ of war" (22-23) which was respectfully treated by creating "art" (20) from the "heads of enemies" (21), a special form of art learnt not from man but from ants.

Ao's repetition and highlighting of the phrase "STONE-PEOPLE" to begin each stanza from the second stanza onwards can be seen as the poet's deliberate attempt to subvert the "Naga" identity that was given to them by the outsiders. This is because within the Naga, there are many sub-tribes that have their own distinct identities which after being clubbed together into one, many feel that their tribal identity is compromised. Thus Ao's repetition of "STONE- PEOPLE" within the poem is not merely for the purpose of poetical decorum but embedded in it is an identity politics where the poet asserts her ethnicity through the myth of Lungterok, from which "the different clans among the Aos trace their respective origins to one of these stones" (Ao *The Ao-Naga Oral*... 1). This poem then, is where the poet as a member of the Ao community assert the individuality of her community along the greater Naga identity.

Most colonial discourses fail to paint the other side of the natives: their intelligence and skill, although they were lacking in modern tools. S.K. Chaube brings to light these various skills of the natives such as: the terrace cultivation of the Angami, the plentitude of rice yielded by the Chakhesang, salt prepared from brine springs by the Sema, cultivation of cotton and the quality of woven-cotton, usage of iron and skills of the smelters, the discovery of manufacture of gunpowder by the Mizo, all in the pre-British days (30-31). Despite all these traces of high intelligence and skill of the people living in the northeastern part of India, colonial discourse did very little in portraying them in a civilizing light. This is because colonial dichotomy was prone to dismiss the natives "as a sort of quintessence of evil" (Fanon 32) in whose mentality was no room for values and ethics.

The first attempt at administration of the natives of the Northeast by the British was met with hostility and skepticism. Prior to the British, the different people living in the Northeast were never under one administration. They were ruled by their respective chiefs and members of the tribal council who administered to them according to their customary laws and traditions when necessary. Occasional raids were integral to the survival of the people in dire situations as much as they were expansion of the chief's rule. There are innumerable accounts of open hostility to the initial British rule by the natives which had caused many lives of both parties. Although the British government abolished chieftainship in the hills, they retained the image of "traditional chiefs [who] were converted into agents of administration with formalized authority" (Chaube 36). Often, this authority of the chiefs were questioned by the natives themselves as they were dissatisfied with the new form of administration: some disputes were beyond the jurisdiction of the chiefs who were to subscribe to the mandates of the new administration.

The difficulty that posed in administration of the Northeast was not only the differences in geography, but socio-cultural and religious aspects as well. This is because the Northeast is a conglomeration of numerous ethnic tribes having their unique customs and practices. The British found that what worked in one area with certain ethnic group did not work with others; thus the entire region came to be known as "problematic area" as there were outbursts of feuds against the British from time to time.

The British administrators segregated the Northeast from the rest of India through Section 2 of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873 by introduction of "a line to be called the Inner Line and to prohibit any subject living outside the area from living or moving therein" (Chaube 14). Pointing out the "policy of exclusion" by the British, Harekrishna Deka states that the driving philosophy behind this policy was for the benefit of the British administrators who were determined to keep the rising nationalist movements in other parts of India from entering into the Northeast region. In doing so, "the Empire would not only have retained a foothold in the region but would have remained an influential factor in the affairs of the sub-continent" (Deka 4). The implementation of the Inner Line isolated the Northeast from the rest of India, geographically and politically and has hampered the development of national integration between greater India and the north-eastern region of India. Geo-political isolation ensued in the problem of misunderstanding within the nation-state.

Belonging to Mongoloid stock, the people of the Northeast vastly differ in their physical features and cultural habits from the Aryan and Dravidian stocks that populate the other parts of India. Due to this, there is a stronger cultural affinity and ethnic ties with the neighbouring countries who belong to the same stock and with

whom many people of the Northeast region have shared history. Nongkynrih, in a series of his poems dealing with his first visit to Delhi, the capital of India, mentions his feeling of alienation and bafflement at the vast divide, as he documents in "In Delhi:II" (1992):

> In Delhi I felt lost.
> The language is not
> like our bazaar Hindi.
> …
> The (auto-rickshaw) driver asked
> From where we had come.
> We told him of Shillong,
> But the man had never heard of it.
> He did not even take us for Indians.
> I felt alienated. (1-3, 7-12)

As if this isolation was not enough, the Radcliffe Line of 1947 further distanced the Northeast economically from the rest of India as it brought to change the existing economic trade that had been carried on between the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias of the Northeast with the Muslims of East Bengal for ages. Although there was severe backlash of the adoption of Radcliffe Line which claimed innumerable lives due to communal riots that it ensued in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the Radcliffe Line was never dissolved. Talking about the rise of nations, John McLeod points out that the idea of nation "emerged with the growth of Western capitalism and industrialization and was a fundamental component of imperialist expansion" (58). Recognising that borders "do not happen by accident," McLeod says that these borders are "constructed, defended and (in too many tragic cases) bloodily contested

by groups of people" (68). This is true of the rise of the Northeast as a frontier territory. The borders drawn by the British in the map did not consider the situation of the indigenous people who were scattered in different places. This resulted in the segregation of groups of people into different territories: examples of which can be seen in the presence of Tangkhul Nagas in Manipur, Mizo sub-tribes in Tripura and neighbouring Myanmar and so on.

Marxist studies have stressed on the control of economy by political powers in an industrialized society, emphasizing on class division within a particular society. The proletariat, or the working classes are exploited by the bourgeois, the upper classes as their profits depend on their "efficient management of the working class" (Nayar *Contemporary* 122). What Radcliffe Line ensued in economic structure was to put the people of the Northeast at the other end of profit-making. Prior to the British administration of the Northeast, there existed a well- developed trade system between the people of the Northeast and their neighbours, evidenced by the ancient Silk Road through Nathu La, Sikkim towards Bangladesh and through Kamrup, Assam towards Burma. Trade realations with Tibet, Burma, Yunnan province of China, Nepal and Bhutan were of great significance to the economy of the Northeast during the pre-colonial days (Nibedon 11). The earlier form of barter-trade that had been carried on in the hills especially in Meghalaya with Bangladesh has been reflected in the works of Nongkynrih and Kharmawphlang:

> Cherra in the days of Ramhah,
> before the white men came,
> was a booming town,
> and the noise of its market days
> carried all the way, they say,

to the foothills of Bangla. (Nongkynrih *Moments* 35)

However, the present-day Cherra has completely changed from the days of Ramhah: the noises of the busy market has been silenced and there is but an "incredible barrenness" as described in a poem for Nigel Jenkins who asked about Cherra:

Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes
a living from stones and caterpillars
gathered for out-of-town drunks
each market day. (Misra: 66)

The pathetic picture painted by the poet in the above lines from "The Ancient Rocks of Cherra" brings out the effects of the Radcliffe Line. What was once a thriving place of business has been reduced by poverty where the items on sale are no longer goods that attracted people in distant places but "out-of-town drunks." Radcliffe Line destroyed the well- developed water transport system and the careers of many industries/ business that depended on this mode of transport were jeopardized. This had insisted on the importance of road transport as a result of which the Northeast region suffered a great economic setback as its only connection with the rest of the country is through a tiny corridor that effectively happened because of Bangladesh being separated from India. The focus of the Central Government was improving modes of transport for oil, gas and timber sectors which meant that there was little fund left for the development of other economic sectors (Hazarika *Strangers of...*258). Yet the interest in developing certain economic sector attests to the hegemony of the Central government as it seeks to profit not the people of the Northeast but the Central itself through natural resources found in the

Northeast. In "Letter to a Friend" (1993), Kharmawphlang talks of the fate of his mother-land:

> You ask me about our hills – well,
> they are still there - the stones
> and rivers too – they are being
> pimped for tourists and lately,
> in many places disemboweled mercilessly. (10-14)

Following Independence, the Indian nation was adamant on decolonizing itself from the mechanisms of colonialism. The continuity of colonial discourse through historiography post Independence still placed the people living in the Northeast at the margins. In the process of decolonization, it sought to "challenge the epistemic authority of historiography" by re-reading "official histories to recover alternate and richer readings of the past" (Paranjape 3). However, such re-readings seemed to provide little chance of recovery from the colonial bias that the people living in the Northeast had faced.

This influence of colonial historiography is evident in the attitude of the Indian masses even after Independence. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, in her book, *Out Of India* (1957) talks about the impact of colonialism in the minds of the "Westernized Indians" saying:

> Everything they say, all that lively conversation around the buffet table, is not prompted by anything they really feel strongly about but by what they think they ought to feel strongly about…They know modern India to be an important subject and they have a lot to say about it: but though they themselves are modern India, they don't look at themselves, they are not

> conditioned to look at themselves except with the eyes of foreign experts whom they have been taught to respect. (17)

The above statement reveals the rise of 'new elites' in postcolonial societies whose mode of perception of their selves and the others have undergone significant changes. Nayar observes that the important ability of colonialism was to "generate convincing images of itself" (45). Thus, the "Westernized native" begins to project the image of "superior Western/primitive native, benevolent Westerner, colonialism as development and so on" (49). Colonialism was not only of lands and materials but also of the mind. In the process of "colonizing the mind," the colonizers' language and logic were internalized by the natives. Gradually, the Westernized native began to adopt the superior Western/primitive native in his relationship with different tribes of India. This is evident in Nehru's observation of the people of the Northeast in the early stages of India's independence from the British. In the attempt to unify the nation, he spoke of the Northeast as "anti- Indian" not only because of its geographical isolation from the rest of the country but because of the influence of the British missionaries. Despite this, he was aware of their importance in the Indian nation, as he mentioned it in his October 1952 speech:

> All this North-East border area deserves our special attention not only the governments, but of the people of India. Our contacts with them will do us good and will do them good also. They add to the strength, variety and cultural richness of India. As one travels there, a new and vaster richness of India comes before the eyes and the narrowness of outlook which sometimes obsesses us, begins to fade away. (indiansaga)

Nehru's remark on the Northeast is replete with colonial discourse: the creation of the divide between the mainland and the border. His opinion of the

Northeast fits remarkably well into the slogan of "unity in diversity" of independent India, a slogan that many Northeasterners today feel is void of meaning except in "tourist brochures," "theory" and "politician's speech," as expressed by Chhangte in her poem "What Does An Indian Look Like" (2011). Nehru's revelation of his ignorance of the region attests to the lack of understanding of the Northeast by the people living in other parts of India. The avowal of "the narrowness of outlook" towards the region also signifies the attitude of the mainland towards the border-lands: that of apathy and presuppositions.

During the per-day limitation of text messages by Trai in 2011 following the wake of terrorist movements in the region, a column in *The Telegraph* daily echoed much of the North-easterners' conception of the Indian state by calling it "a bossy parent" (9). The limitation of text messages decreed by the Indian state was viewed as "draconian regulations" as the people's rights were being compromised upon by "being told how to conduct their private lives" (9).

On the subject of apathy, it would be misleading to claim the sole apathy of Indian government post-Independence for the North-east had been subjected to government apathy even during the British rule. According to Sanjoy Hazarika, they had been "lightly administered" by the British. The British government left the task of "pacifying" the natives at the hands of the missionaries. Apart from laying down laws and imposing fines on offences, the British rule was "restricted… to… waving flag on annual excursions" (133).

The Indian government's apathy is also evident in the lack of awareness on the issue of migration in the Northeast. The seriousness of these influxes from neighbouring countries have not been properly addressed by the Central government.

Influxes has always been one of the main problems in the Northeast, as mentioned by Brigadier Thenphunga Sailo, then the Chief Minister of Mizoram in 1981 that the North-east "need the help and assistance from the rest of the country," to combat the problems of immigrants from the neighbouring countries (Nibedon x). According to the 2011 Census of India, the total population of the Northeast is about 45 million whereas in 2001 Census of India, the population was about 38 million. This means that there has been an increase of 6.5 million within ten years' time. Based on data collected on the population rise in the region, it is highly improbable for a region to grow so much even when factors such as low death rates and progress and modernity of medicine are taken into account.

Although this persisting problem of influx has not received much attention of the Central government, poets like Nongkynrih has addressed to this problem in his poem "The Influx" (2011) :

> And so they come
>
> these desperate men
>
> from mountains and plains
>
> like little drops of rain (6-8)

Kharmawphlang presents a comprehensive picture of migration of others into his state, Meghalaya, in the poem "The Conquest." Through the poem, the poet recounts that the first form of influx began when men who "went beyond the/ Surma/ to trade" (8-10) brought home "women/ to nurture their seed" (10-11). Then it was the British who brought with them "gifts of bullets, blood-money/ and

religion" (13-14). The problem of influx became more aggravated in the present times as the poet is unable to locate the places of origin of the migrants:

> But in the wavering walk of time
>
> there came those from the sweltering
>
> plains,
>
> from everywhere. (20-23)

Illegal migration poses a serious threat to the people of Northeast India as demographic imbalance arises and has caused "displacement of indigenous population from their ancestral land" (Phukan 2). Since the birth rate among the indigenous people of the Northeast is relatively low, increasing number of migrants has led to aggravated socio-economic and ethnic problems. In the poem "Only Strange Flowers Have Come to Bloom" (2011), Nongkynrih talks about pears that was brought to Khasi Hills by David Scott. This imported fruit- bearing tree has notoriously "supplant[ed]/ the natives everywhere" (2-3), "bossing around/ courtyards and private gardens" (17-18). The poet makes note of the replacement of the indigenous by the imported tree and finds parallel in the unchecked flow of migrants from other places. The poem ends with a resonating defeat:

> Like flowers, only strangers
>
> and strange ways have come
>
> to bloom in this land. (19-21)

Since Independence from the British, there has been preoccupation with the Northeast region in nationalizing space and using this land frontier as a tool for

nation building. There have been developmental policies to take Northeast within the enclosure of development where development and underdevelopment gets constituted discursively and objective material conditions take a back seat. This is because the problems that plague the people of the Northeast cannot be easily relieved. Natural calamities such as flood and landslides have thwarted developmental projects in the region. Moreover, there have been "faulty planning and distorted development" which, instead of alleviating the innumerable problems have only made dependence on the Central government greater (Hazarika *Strangers No…* 260). Moreover, ignorance of the multitude issues faced by the people of the Northeast by the authorities at the Centre have caused dissent among the people of the Northeast towards the Central government. Many believe that developmental schemes such as the Look East Policy does not really benefit the region as the Central government seems to enjoy the benefits of the trade. Despite these developmental policies, the people of the Northeast are acutely aware of apathy of the Central Government. One example is found in Nongkynrih's take on the flying visit to Shillong by I.K Gujral, then the Prime Minister of India in his poem "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong the Bamboos Watched in Silence" (2011) :

He came with twin objectives

a mission for peace and progress.

But he was a rumbling in the clouds

a prattle in the air. (9-12)

The brevity of the Prime Minister's visit did not seem to provide assurance to the people but only confounded them

They wondered
what he could have seen
of the land
what of the people
he could have learnt
when he came
like the snapping of fingers. (25-31)

Known as a "problematic region" throughout the rest of India, the people of the Northeast have for a long time suffered government apathy. There is an overwhelming sense of distrust towards the Central Government as the ongoing problems faced by the people have not been meaningfully pondered upon. The fact that "no effort has been made to evolve a policy that would take care of the special need of the region" (Tohring xii), has strongly instilled in the minds of the people of the continuing apathy of the Central government. Their voices have been misheard and subdued by the point of a gun and enough truth has not been portrayed by the media. In such stance where the very existence of the people are misrepresented and their voices sidelined, poetry becomes a medium through which the people can honestly speak of their experiences of terror and fear since the time of the British till date.

Dai's poem "Remembrance" (2004) talks about the fear that has gripped the racial memory of her people who had previous experiences of the terror of war. She exposes the psychological torment of the people who heard "the footfall of soldiers" (12) and "the hidden exchange of news…/that weapons are multiplying in the forest" (13-14). This poem is an important testament of what had taken place in the Abor

Hills during the British Expedition of 1893- 94 seen from the viewpoint of the natives. This course of history that had changed the fate of her people affirmed that nothing is permanent, as Dai probes:

> Why did we think survival was simple,
> that river and field would stand forever
> invulnerable, even to the dreams of strangers (6-8)

The rise of ethnic consciousness among the people of the Northeast had led to countless movements against the nation-state. Many factors of dissent that had accumulated since the time of the British had vented out in recent times across the region in the forms of insurgency and violence. Ao talks about the rise of ethnic consciousness among her people in the poem "Blood of Others" (2011) where she states that the "re-awakened songs and stories" (61) have inspired her people to "articulate a different discourse/ And re-designate new enemies" (63-64). This reawakening has led to the demand of "reinstatement/ of customary identity/ And restoration of ancestral ground" (65-67).

Without the attempt at understanding the "nature of ethnicity and ethnic groups…in terms of subjective experiences" (Nibedon xvi), military action was launched to curb the movements which, instead of pacifying the people, aggravated and confounded them. Failure to understand that the problems faced by the people of the Northeast is not merely political but "cultural, social, linguistic and economic in nature" (Tohring xii) has caused misrepresentations of the problems and their solutions. There is also the disagreement with terming these ethnic movements as "insurgency" as "an attempt to preserve one's identity does not necessarily mean that

he is an insurgent nor does an attempt to preserve one's independence…amounts to insurgency" (xii).

The deployment of military action in these troubled states has resulted in many incidents in which it is the common people who suffer the effects of these movements . Robin Ngangom in the poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom" (2006) talks about the pathetic condition of the people in Manipur. The poet talks of the inhumane treatment of the people by "soldiers with black scarves/ like mime artists/ [who] turn them in seconds into shrouds" (70- 72). The poet continues with the images of "trucks carrying/ the appliances of death and devastation," "the eager rescuer in his armoured car," "the first visitor to the fabled homeland," "the graves of youths who died in turmoil" (73-75) which seem to constitute "the only milestones to the city" (76).

In the Northeast, the plight of the people who live in duress do not receive much attention. In the poem, "But Faith Comes and Goes" (1992), Nongkynrih portrays the atrocity which the locals experience as "death here swoops/ like a buzzard at playing chickens" (13-14). Nongkynrih employs the images of birds and animals to evoke the inhumanity that has seemed to prevail in Meghalaya. Comparing the local citizens with "playing chickens," the poet brings in the harmlessness of the people who are under the constant hovering of death. The poet goes on to portray how common death is around them as "sobs and mutilated corpses" (17) welcome those who had ventured out of their homes. In fact, their lives become compounded as "granaries are empty" (24) because "vigils have crippled [their] work" (25). Such is the magnitude of their suffering that some of them even question their faith:

> But faith comes and goes,

comes with the festivals,

goes with the terrorists

until the next festival again. (26- 29)

Elsewhere, in the poem "Curfew" (1988), Ngangom has mentioned the crippling of ordinary life as one turn of violence resulted in curfews. There is an air of disquiet as he talks of "motionless quiet/ that has descended like fate" (3-4) :

I'm cut off from friends, wings shorn,

weekend plans have foundered

in unprecedented regret. (7-9)

Ngangom gives us a graphic picture of the sufferings of the innocent people in Manipur in his poem "Native Land" (2008):

First came the scream of the dying

in a bad dream, then the radio report,

and a news paper: six shot dead, twenty- five

houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied

behind their backs inside a church (1-5)

In the first three lines of the poem, Ngangom employs three stages of reception of terror that becomes more substantial owing to the medium of presentation: the scream of the dying that sounded like in a bad dream was confirmed by the radio report and a newspaper. Ngangom heightens the amount of atrocity by elevating the situation of deaths: he begins with reporting the number of

people shot dead before talking about the number of houses razed then goes on to tell of the sixteen who were beheaded with their hands tied at their backs inside a church. Such atrocity meted out on fellow human beings led to the loss of one's faith in humanity, as Ngangom continues:

> As the days crumbled, and the victors
>
> And their victims grew in number,
>
> I hardened inside my thickening hide,
>
> until I lost my tenuous humanity. (6-9)

Through their poetical works, poets of the Northeast have spoken about the effects of violence and terror in the native's psyche. Communal riots that have broken out in many parts of Northeast India in recent times have affected peace and progress within the region. Curfews and bandhs have crippled the economy in the land as well. While there is sensational portrayal of such riots in national media, there is very little mention of common people who are caught up in such riots. In "Sundori," Nongkynrih presents the effect of communal riots between lovers who belong to different communities:

> Beloved Sundori,
>
> Yesterday one of my people
>
> Killed one of your people
>
> And one of your people
>
> Killed one of my people.
>
> Today they have both sworn
>
> To kill on sight.

But this is neither you nor I. (1-8)

The desperation of the lovers against this communal riots can only be solved by one simple act:

Shall we meet by the Umkhrah River

And empty this madness

Into its angry summer floods? (9-11)

While the voices of the common people suffering the effects of ethnic violence are muted and misrepresented by sensational journalism, "the sensitive hearts of these poets express their pain and anguish in articulating what happens around them" (Baral *Emerging…* 11). Since colonial times till date, the power with which the texts are written remain mostly in the hands of others: even today, the Northeast region is known as an insurgent area, a land of violence and conflict mainly because of the sifting process of media within the country. There have been bias in the portrayal of the region in media as well, especially in the newspapers. The many issues and problems faced by the people living in the Northeast region remain inadequately portrayed through the news and other forms of media. From the colonial times till present, Northeast India has been misjudged from many angles and is in the process of recovering; a recovery not only from the effects of its countless regional violence and conflicts but also from many bias that have been hurled against it over a long period of time.

This is where poets of the region have taken up the "role of chroniclers" (Baral *Earth Songs* iv) who seek to offer a counter- discourse against the dominant discourse that had placed them at the margins by providing in their poems "an alternative history" that challenges colonial historiography through poetic renderings of

their histories, beliefs and ethnicities. However, this counter-discourse does not mean an exercise to subvert the colonial discourse but to "expose and erode" (Tiffin 96) the politics of colonial historiography. The poets have sought to reclaim loss of their history in the dominant discourse by writing about their history and offer alternatives by intervening in the discourse to provide multiple voices on the behalf of their people.

Apart from this, poets of the region have also lent voices to the group of unrepresented people whose voices would otherwise have never been heard. The act of writing poetry thus becomes a highly political act in that it seeks to portray issues that are pertinent to the people in an artistic manner. On being asked about the extent of the influence of politics in her poetry, Mamang Dai replies, "To the extent that politics is about representation and governance" (Guha 8).

Also, by appropriating the language of the administrators, the poets have found the medium to voice their resistance against colonial representation and its impact in their day to day life. Through their writing, they have sought for "some kind of wholeness in the face of disintegration and fragmentation" (Baral xi). Resistance has been called "a native appropriation of its ambivalent strategies of power" (Sharpe 101) and in resisting against the politics of colonial historiography, the poets have found an intervening space in their poetry and in so doing, they have found a platform for the marginalized to speak.

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CHAPTER THREE

POETRY AS A SITE FOR THE MARGINALISED HUMAN

Contemporary cultural studies have located the occurrences of power struggle between an individual and the society. According to Foucault's "analysis of power" (212), marginalized individuals resist the exertion of power by institutions by refusing to conform to the power relations. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault perceptively states that "where there is power, there is resistance" (95). Within a society, "power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization" (Foucault *Power*… 98) in order to produce resistance. This power structure has formulated binaries within the social strata between male/female, white/black, government/governed and so on. Accordingly, within the binary of patriarchy, it is the woman who is the marginalized human just as it is the man who is the marginalized human in a matrilineal society. In the formation of these binaries, one section within the binary is considered to be the weaker.

It has been argued that politics of gender has demarcated historiography by sidelining women and their roles in history (Passah 57). The woman is otherized by traditional customary laws and social systems as well as male authority which relegates her individuality. In her study of postcolonial identities, Ania Loomba opines that in the relationship between the colonizers and colonized, the issue of sexuality was "a means for the maintenance or erosion of racial difference" (135). Although the roles of women were not featured in epoch history-making, their sexuality was often mentioned "as colonial contacts widen and deepen" (134) eventually. Thus the woman became the keeper of "racial purity," becoming relegated to her sexuality alone while she remained silenced in historical texts. Loomba calls this stance of

"positioning and erasing women in colonial writings" a "double positioning" that "indicate the intricate overlaps between colonial and sexual domination" (135). This is not to state that "double positioning" was a deliberate exercise but a reflection of the way women were viewed in such times when historians were men who did not see women more than "just part of the scenario" (Passah 57). Thus the activities and contributions of women were ignored while writing history since "by reporting on the activities of men, it was assumed that the scope of women's activities would be understood too" (57). This act affirms the privilege of the male as an authoritative figure within the institution of a society. Thus patriarchal systems are indulgent in the male satisfaction and are indifferent to female fulfillment.

In the Northeast, the suppressed and marginalized premise of binary historiography has a claim to literary space in contemporary times. Within different communities in the region at differing levels, the woman has been otherized as mentioned, by customary and social power structure which is reflects male authority within the social construct. Regarding power structure, Foucault has stated in *Power/ Knowledge* (1980) that "power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization" and that "individuals are the vehicles of power, not its application" (98). While women in the Northeast are considered to occupy better positions at home and within the social mileau than those of their mainstream counterparts within the country (Brara 75), they are still subjected to what Meeta Deka calls "historical amnesia" (xvii) and "double positioning" especially in historiography. Within the space of literature, the different roles and social and personal relevance have been creatively unveiled by poets of the region, thereby providing a space for the marginalized human to resist against such positioning. Well aware of psychoanalytic

and feminist influences on their creative selves, most poets of the region have responded to this amnesia critically within the framework of poetry.

In mainstream literature of India, the mid-nineteenth century reformation movement placed woman "at the heart of the nation-making project" (Paranjape 146) by endowing women characters with unsurpassable qualities who dared to push against social norms and traditions. Seen as "important agents of social change," the centrality of women gradually shifted from the main protagonists in novels and short stories to publication of books written by women. Although the general attitude of the Indian masses especially of the women towards educated women was still condescending during the nineteenth century, these books written by women revealed a new sense of "social and political consciousness" (148) among the educated Indian women. Paranjape notes that whereas "what women themselves had to say was often ignored, forgotten or marginalized" (148) by male writers in their creation of strong women characters, women who took up writing began to speak about their experiences of oppression and of their lives in general. The emerging new voices of women in literature provided polyphonic voices that attested to the lived experiences of women which had earlier been silenced or misrepresented by male writers.

Gender studies on patriarchal representation of women have noted the placement of women in ancient Indian texts where they remained mostly relegated to their duties in their home and hearth. Aparna Mathur in her essay "Re-reading the *Arthashastra*" (2017) has pointed out the fact that women in ancient India were mentioned in matters relating to marriage, wifely duties, inheritance and justice whereas in polity and economy, women remained unmentioned. Mathur also stresses on the position of the queens as mentioned in *Arthashastra* thereby concluding that even the queens in ancient India were subjected to patriarchal domination and were

"not free from patriarchal biases" (50). Joyshree Nath in her essay, "Representation of Gender Relations in Sudraka's *Macchakatika*" (2017) discusses on the construction of gender relations within the household (69). According to Nath, the ancient play reveals the fact that all women during those days, whether rich or poor, powerful or not "thought of themselves as persons depending on the protection of a man" (72). Not only were women relegated to household duties, they were subjugated to the "lack of flexibility" (72) even in the household duties assigned to them. A close inspection of different poems that have been written by poets of the Northeast have revealed, in differing social construct, that the relegation of women to household duties is the same even during contemporary age despite the appearance of women emancipation and liberty.

In any indigenous society, both the man and woman play significant roles towards the development of their society; and the contribution of women cannot be overlooked. Women in Northeast India are considered to have more contribution to their society when compared nationally due to their indigenous social set-up. This is evident in many of their folktales where the men were warriors and hunters and it was the women who took care of the home while the men were away. In fact, women of Northeast India have been active participants in various economic enterprises even before cottage industries and other opportunities of trade have improved in recent times. Exemplary of such is the institution of women's market in Manipur known as *Ima Keithel*. This strong institution of women vendors had fought against the British in 1904 and 1936 which marked "the first people's organized protest against the British" and had also led other protests especially against the armed forces: one of the most recent being the protest against the killing of Manorama in 2004 (Brara 75). In Meghalaya, Jaintia women are known for their

skilled pottery through which they have made significant contribution to their economy (Passah 63).

In the essay "Reinterpretation on Sources for Writing Gender History" (2017), Manorama Sharma says that the history women of Northeast India needs to be relooked "from the perspective of gender history" in order to "recover women and their experiences from the margins of history and give those a centre stage and the necessity of reinterpreting the existing sources" (14). In contemporary setting, there are analyses of historical and literary texts that have questioned the silence on the contribution of women especially in terms of their contribution in the political and economic scenario. Examining the contribution of the Khasi- Jaintia women in their society and economy, Passah states that there has not been a comprehensive view on women and their roles prior to the British (58). Noting the contribution of women during the freedom struggles in Assam, Jahidul Islam Khan laments that the contributions made by women have not been properly acknowledged in history texts (37). Khan feels that proper acknowledgment of the contribution of women during the freedom struggle would provide a pivotal drive to the present attempt of uplifting the position of the girl child within the state (37).

The idea that women of the Northeast occupy better stances than other women within the rest of the country could have been developed due to the absence of child marriages and dowry system especially among the people living in the hills. On the contrary, as Vijaylakshmi Brara mentions, to judge the absences of sati, female infanticide and purdah system as indicators of better positions in the society is a "methodological fallacy" as "that does not necessarily mean that they are better and have a very high status" (74). In fact, the condition of women in matrilineal Khasi society is also not freed of inequality. Contrary to popular belief, women in

Meghalaya do not have voices in societal administration (80). In their study titled "Gender Inequality in North East India," Bidisha Mahanta and Purusottam Nayak conclude that while women of the Northeast region enjoyed better position in terms of "longevity, educational attainment and control over resources" when compared to other women in India, they play significantly lesser role in political activities. This, according to Mahanta and Nayak, could be because politically the women of Northeast India "acted as proxies" in politics, not because they were politically unaware. However, Brara has mentioned that women participation especially in Nagaland and Meghalaya has been thwarted due to the existence of "well-defined gender roles" (84) constructed by the society within which women are excluded from political activities.

Although being excluded from active political participation, women as communities do take active roles, evident in mass participation of women as, in the words of Brara, "pressure groups and peace builders" (76). Like the *Ima Keithel* of Manipur, the women organization in Assam during the freedom struggle not only participated in politics, but actively engaged their participation towards curbing societal evils such as liquor, opium and foreign goods (Khan 37). Women organizations in the Northeast, especially the Naga Mothers' Association of Manipur has struggled for the validity of their Constitutional rights to stand for elections in the Municipal Council (Brara 76). Despite the Supreme Court granting their rights, they are still denied of their rights by the Naga Hoho, a men's organization in Manipur (77). In fact, Brara's study of change in gender relations among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur has reflected an important shift lately towards the placement of women in the present society. It has been noted that the "historical legacy of women occupying a seat of power" such as chieftainship or village council

members have gradually changed due to "penetration of hegemonic patriarchal notions of major religion" (77) among the Tangkhuls in due course of time. Analyzing the changes brought about by similar experience of colonialism in African society, Hazel Carby, a Black feminist has made a point that British colonialism had "disrupt[ed]… female organizations that were based upon kinship system which allowed more power and autonomy to women than those of the colonizing nation" (McLeod 177). As a construct, colonialism has continued the safe rule of the same in subverting the authority of women in Tangkhul Naga society of Northeast India. However, this does not overlook the fact that most societies in the Northeast belonged to patriarchal set-up. One of the lasting effects of colonialism in a society is its reassertion of patriarchy by its tendency to "add other kinds of patriarchal systems to an already unequal situation" (177). Thus the situation of an indigenous woman, as seen in the case of the women in Tangkhul Naga society, in a patriarchal society became aggravated following colonialism where traditional gender roles were "irreparably broken" (177). In the Northeast, the Khasi-Jaintia women of Meghalaya have been barred from political participation by the male-oriented council of members (Passah 60). Even among the Ao-Nagas, women are not allowed to be members of the village council known as the Putu Menden (Ao *Identity and…* 33), an institution where each clan is represented by a carefully selected clan member.

Despite the assumption that women in the Northeast enjoy a relatively better status than other women of India, they are subjected to the same patriarchal system that is common to women across the globe. Like elsewhere, they are seen as the nurturer, the keeper of the home and hearth and praised for their sexuality; which according to feminist studies is the means through which women are subjugated to "reinfor[ce] male domination" (Nayar *Contemporary…* 83). In fact, in a series of

poems dedicated to Ruby, the poet Nongkynrih paints the picture of woman as a gratifier of sensual passions and as an inspiring force to the hungry poet. In the poem, "Do Not Ask" (1992), the speaker asks his listener not to ask him what "charms" and "wiles" that his lover possesses to make him fall for her. Facing tormenting disapproval for the woman he had fallen in love with, the poem is a justification of the woman's innocence against his family's belief that she might have bewitched him unnaturally. Claiming her innocence, he states that the love of a woman is enough for him:

> She holds nothing,
> she knows nothing,
> but she can love
> and she has loved for years. (8-11)

A feminist reading of the speaker's attempt to project the innocence of his love- interest as a woman who has done nothing more than love him degrades her. The male speaker in the poem portrays the person of his love-interest as someone who has no powers and self-knowledge of her own. The poet who himself is a defender of the marginalized however betrays some sexist attitude which robs her of her other capabilities such as her education, skills and participation in social and political roles and relegates her to a sign of patriarchal objectification of woman as sexual pacifier. Moreover, through these lines, there is a process of "mystifying" the love-interest which presents her as the significant Other. The repetition of her knowing "nothing," while it is a deliberate act to reinforce the innocence of the woman against being accused of bewitching the man, reveals the double standard manner in which a woman is seen in a matrilineal society: that while certain women

are considered to be bad influences, they are not seen as essentially capable of wily crafts and intellectual worth. In the essay "Gender History in Khasi-Jaintia Hills" (2017), Passah states that literary conventions from the time of orality has subjugated the character of woman, saying that "women have been portrayed as simple, guileless, compassionate but not dynamic, enterprising, resilient and courageous" (320). The poem is thus, reflective of the literary conventions in the portrayal of the woman as a simple woman whose best capability is to love and whose intellectual and emotional strength is but silenced.

A post-structuralist reading of the poet's attempt to project the blamelessness of his love- interest also signifies certain prejudices that women in a Khasi society are subjected to: the poet hints at the idea that his listeners believe that a man must be possessed in one way or the other by the woman to have stolen his heart so. These layers of signifiers subvert perceptions of a matrilineal society where women are as much subjected to prejudices as in a patriarchal society. In fact, the status of women in a matrilineal society of Meghalaya is not completely free of male domination. Debating against the view that "women held all the power in the home and society" (60), Passah elaborates on the fact that it was always the male; be it the maternal uncle or the member of the chief's council who has the final say and not the woman. Also, this instance of female projection seen through the poem affirms Brara's observation of the real status of women in Meghalaya's Khasi society contrary to its tradition of hallowed matrilineality, which unveils the actual social and political status of women (84).

Nongkynrih's poems reveal much more layers of the condition of women in the Khasi matrilineal society. In the poem, "Only My Tenant" (1992), the poet comically portrays the ill-treatment he receives from the owner of a house he was

renting: who he describes as “the big-bosom queen” (51) and who seems bent on yielding her power over the poet’s persona. Yet amidst the comical presentation of the illogically-sane woman lies a note of despair: her jobless husband indulges in marijuana and “pester[s] the girls in the streets” (52). Sweepingly mentioned in the poem is the occurrence of domestic violence within the household. Yet the tone in which it is being said is suggestive of the indifference of the society towards domestic violence where women are the victims. Yet disheartening to note is the fact that there is no solidarity among the women, as suggested by the lines:

> Let him beat me sometimes, so what?
> That bloody professor might beat his wife too,
> When he gets married. (52)

The above lines depict not only the lack of solidarity among women in this particular social set-up but also reveals a pitiful insight of the self-dehumanization of the tenant who, in her feeling of powerlessness in conjugal life has developed an attitude of “disruption” towards “an individual’s sense of humanity” (Yang). The poem is suggestive of the tenant’s sense of lessening of a wrong suffered in enjoying another being wronged. In other words, she displays an overarching influence of inhumanity which, according to Yang, is “the central feature of dehumanization” as it displays her “failure to attribute feelings or qualities of mind to humans.”

On the other hand, domestic violence is one way in which the powerless man within the structure of matrilineal society vents out his frustration, as observed by Passah in her essay, “Gender History in Khasi- Jaintia Hills” (2017). Thus, Nongkynrih’s projection of domestic violence in the above poem is also a reflection of the “intricacies of Khasi male insecurity” (326) which has been the result of a

desperate act committed by most men who feel that the matrilineal society has "depriv[ed] them of their rights" (325) in terms of inheritance and children. In deconstructing the signifiers in the poem "Only My Tenant" (51), the condition of a hapless man caught in matrilineal society can clearly be seen. This explains why the husband has no job and indulges in bad habits like "pestering the girls in the streets" (52), smoking marijuana, getting drunk and beating his wife. Basing the argument on the study of psychological self-dehumanization, both the tenant and her husband have been caught in the structure of the society where they both constitute perpetrators and victims under the cycle of powerlessness.

Nongkynrih's other poems also touch on such male insecurity and helplessness especially in the matters of marriage where his family members have stronger opinion than himself, leading him to ask, "Tell me, do I marry for myself?" (Sometimes It's Rough When They Think [1992] 38) or when they thought him to have lost his mind as he told them of his love, as he testifies: "My family saw the shadow of a madcap/ mirrored in my impulsive self" (To The Friends Who Thought I Deserved Love [1992] 29). These lines are clear reflections of the situation of a young man caught between his desires and that of his family's.

In "Gender History" (2017), Passah's observation of cases in novels written by Krieshon Rapthap and Bijoya Sawain (323- 324) wherein the issue of male insecurity have been brought up signifies the predicament not only of the man in a matrilineal society but also, more importantly, the predicament of the woman as a wife suffering the dejection of her dissenting husband. According to Passah, the adverse effects of matrilineal society to the emotional life of a male find expressions in domestic

violence or in the act of the man leaving his wife and children (325) which are revealed in the works of Rapthap and Sawain.

Freudian studies on language have asserted that "language concealed, revealed or modified hidden desires, anxieties and fears" (Nayar *Contemporary…* 64). According to Freud, since the conscious is conditioned by the pressures of society, repressed expressions take the forms of "gestures, sounds, facial expression, writing" (64) in order to vent out. With this in mind, Nongkynrih's poems reveal, as Passah has commented on Rapthap and Sawain's novels, a complex state of a man caught between the dictates of his heart and the dictates of society manifested through his family. A close reading of Nongkynrih's poems reveal the existing tensions of male rebellious streak in a matrilineal society which is not addressed to in everyday life. To cite an example, in the poem "Elsewhere the Land is Young" (1992), the poet confesses about the complicated relationship that he has with a married woman. Although he is overwhelmed by the "helpless feeling,/ despairing" of being lost in "a married woman's roomy darkness" (6-8), the poet's decision is not to leave the woman but to fall in love all the more with her for her physical shortcoming, as he ends the poem saying, "I must love her/ for her epilepsy" (26-27). Here is the poet as a male persona in a matriarchal society who, though aware of the societal pressures on him, decides to rebel against the conventions of society by choosing not to part from an epileptic married woman.

In many of his poems in *The Sieve* (1992), the poet Nongkynrih talks about disharmony within his family that is caused by his desire to break free from the wishes of his family who to him, are both "the gods" (Eve) and the "insensitive kin" (To the Friends Who Thought I Deserve Love) who are the dictators of the desires of his heart. Thus, the struggle between the Freudian concept of "pleasure

principle" and "reality principle" is clearly seen in the earlier love poems of Nongkynrih. Just as a child gradually learns to cope with the two principles, thereby repressing certain instincts and desire so as to conform to society, Nongkynrih's earlier love poems reveal the struggle with the repression of "pleasure principle." Although the poet uses the medium of poetry to reveal his rebellious nature against his family who were skeptical of his relationship with a woman, it is through the very nature of his rebellion that the poet reveals how he is controlled by the "reality principle." In the poem "To The Friends Who Thought I Deserved Love," (29), when the poet talks of love that "thrives in privacy/ and in quiet moments" (22-23), there is a suggestion of the relationship being carried on but away from the eyes of the society: an act by which the poet submits to the reality principle by carrying out a love-affair secretly. These lines are reminiscent of Freudian concept of impulse control through the ego which is what Freud (1923) calls "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (25). In carrying out his private love-affair in secret with a woman who is scorned because of her past, the poem reveals how two individuals in a society submit to the mechanisms of the ego in their attempt to be accepted by the norms of the society.

The poet ends the poem with an assertion that "love in poetry should be shared,/ that the source of poetry may be aired" (26-27) which suggests that the repressed needs an occasional "slippage." In a latter poem titled "The Ghost" (1998), Nongkynrih talks about the struggle to repress one's emotion for the sake of society, saying: "…it pains me that taboo/ must make us love like thieves/ scurry like cats in the darkness" (10-13). The images viz., thieves and cats scurrying associated with the lovers are suggestive of the weight of society's acceptance while reflecting the pressure of conforming to the demands of the society.

According to Freud (1923), human psyche is divided into three stages: the ego, the super ego and the id. The ego is our conscious rational mind; the super ego, our conscience which is influenced by society and the id which is the unconscious. According to Freud, as a child grows older and learns of the ways of the world, he learns to adapt to the conditions of the society which entails in repression of many instincts and desires. These repressed desires are pushed to the id stage of the human psyche. However, these repressed desires emerge in the form of dreams, jokes and art where they have been conditioned and become socially acceptable. Freud proposes that "art draws upon the unconscious for its themes and images" (Nayar 65). Based on Freud's observation of the influence of the unconscious on art, Nongkynrih's confession of his love-affair with a married woman in his earlier poems maybe seen as slippages from the id stage of his psyche.

In one of his latter poems titled "Light-in-the-night" (2011), the poet, addressing to Amanda, tells her of how he began to write his first poems. After a long discussion on how different is his inspiration to write from the other poets, Nongkynrih reveals that "poetry came like an illness" (48) caused by a single mother who has been abandoned with her child. Meeting her, he was filled with "a sudden desolate yearning,/ something fierce and reckless, a gnawing, tormenting/ desire to reach out, to touch" (52- 54), which gave him the impetus to write poetry. He then goes on to tell her, "when I was young my poetry/ started with an address to a divorcee, a woman/ old enough to be my aunt" (63- 65). Here, the poet uses the medium of poetry to make a confession on why his family had not been supportive of his love-affair when he was younger. Thus, for Nongkynrih, poetry becomes an art where the repressed finds a place of exhibit with a medium that has become socially acceptable. While many claim that the reality of being a woman is that they are

constantly subjugated, in the words of Katrak, by "patriarchy and colonialism" which "collude to worsen women's predicament" (232), Nongkynrih's poems reveal that at times women themselves are as much responsible towards their own predicament.

In the poem, "Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree with Their Sons' Choices of Women," (2006), Nongkynrih talks of the discomfort the mothers bring to their sons who chose to be with women they disapprove of. He says that because of his disobedience in choosing "an object of scorn," he is being garlanded with "threats" and his lover is also not spared from the disdainful family members who cast her with "the stares that stalk / the woman of [his] choice." In "Eve" (1992), Nongkynrih talks about the issues faced by a love- lorn son whose love affairs with women remain unaccepted by his family because he had fallen in love with a woman with a child:

> …how dare I pluck and enjoy
> the forbidden one,
> when I see retributions from the gods,
> my kin? (Eve, 1992; 6-9)

The poet goes on to question himself on the subject of the debate and realizes that his mindset differs from his family members:

> What can they matter
> her child or her divorce
> to a man that has learned
> of purity from Tess or Hardy? (42; 1-4)

A reflection on the lot that has befallen on the women disapproved by the poet's family attests to the ostracism faced by divorced women or women with children out of wedlock. Seen from a comprehensive view, this portrays the fact that there are clear demarcations even in the indigenous community of the Northeast regarding women who fit into the accepted norms of the society and women who do not necessarily fit into such societal constructions. Thus, as having been commented by Brara, to say that the situation of women in the Northeast is considerably better than other Indian women might not be true in all the sense of the term of equality or empowerment. The attitude of women towards their fellow women as reflected in Nongkynrih's poems questions the validity of women empowerment in contemporary tribal society. In her comprehensive study of women empowerment in India, Rajeshwari M. Shettar states that one of the main objectives of women empowerment is to create an environment where women live "without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution" (13) in being a woman.

Nongkynrih's poems far from reflect the success of women empowerment in his society. This is so because the women themselves indulge in the act of oppression and discrimination against the less fortunate women. Besides, feminist cultural theory has commented on the construction of gender by society where a woman, in the words of Judith Butler (1990), "performs" according to the norms of the society. The attitude of the women towards their fellow women reveals their internalization of patriarchy wherein the women, as noted by Simone De Beauvior, "are measured by the standard of men and found 'inferior'" (Nayar *Contemporary…* 88). In the disapproval of the poet's choice of woman, the women of the household reflect what Judith Butler calls "expressions" (25) that are repeated by individuals who have

conformed to the dictation of societal roles. In fact, Nongkynrih's resignation to the futility of struggling against his family's approval, who, to him are "the gods/ my kin" (40) indicates the depth of patriarchy which begins at home, and find repetition by womenfolk within the family.

Having stated the condition of women in the Khasi matrilineal society, the love poems of Nongkynrih also reflect the perception of women by men in a society where women supposedly enjoy certain level of power than those in comparison to the patriarchal society. As Passah has noted, there are changes within the present matrilineal society in Meghalaya due to "internal forces and factors of change" (59) leading to gradual decline of the status of women in contemporary Khasi society. In the poem "She Has No Lipstick on Her Lips" (1992), Nongkynrih projects two kinds of women in his description: one, the "high society dames" (6) who are portrayed as the antithesis to the "modest" and "shy" girl. Here, the two types of women are contrasted against each other as the poet compares the young "devout" girl to the high society dames who are prone to chewing betel-nuts and smoking cigarettes (4-5). Stifled by the construction of identity by her society, Cherrie L. Chhangte pleads to be freed from such gender construction where she is expected to perform accordingly in her poem "Plea" (2011). Chhangte's poem is a resistance against various forms of construction. In the first stanza of the poem, the poet seeks to be a woman with "flesh and blood/ With human failings/ As also human feelings" (4-6) and not be idolized or be shadowed by being mystified. In the second stanza, the poet asserts her personal identity as an individual possessing "personal quirks and needs" (11-12) and in the fourth stanza, the poet asserts her choice of becoming "a temporal reality/ Than an intangible wisp of memory" (23- 24).

In her analysis of the 15th/16th century *Dakor Boson*, a written document of an old tradition of sayings that have been passed down orally in the Assamese society, Manorama Sharma has presented a case of distinction between what had been considered to be qualities socially constructed as inherent in a good and a bad woman (9). While the qualities of a good woman are imbibed in her meekness and submission to her husband, the qualities of a bad woman are reflective of her independence, decisiveness and her refusal to submit to the rigidity of societal norms. This same juxtaposition of two different types of women are expressed by Nongkynrih in the above where two types of women can only be contradicted to each other: one is a picture of natural beauty and innocence, while the other is not so. It is interesting to note that these polar qualities that are attributed to women have been transcended over centuries and cultures and have remained integral to the perception of qualities in women. It is relevant to recall that in his studies of the various forms of knowledge, Foucault has propounded that through discourse, "knowledge is constructed, organized, shared and used through particular forms of speech, writing and language" (Nayar 35).

In the case of women, the discourse of patriarchy has constructed an institution under which women become trapped "in the uneven structures of marriage, education, religion, the law, history, literature, science and politics" (Nayar 36). This implicates that power relations embedded in discourse have subjugated certain groups of people for life in a society. Gambhini Devi's poem "A Village Girl" (2011) is a telling commentary of this case. The poem projects the construction of the identity of a girl according to the standards of a village in Manipur. In reiterating the fact that she was a village girl, the girl keeps reminding herself of the attributes handed to her by her society. Rather than resisting against such construct, she conforms to them

by reminding herself that "village girls do not unfasten their hair" (3), "village girls/ do not look up towards the sky," (10-11) or that she does not walk around "on the pasture wet with morning dew" (14). Devi's poem reveals how power relations are imposed on individuals under set narratives within a society. According to Foucault, discourse not only privileges one section over the weaker section, it retains "power over the marginal and the subordinates through the creation and control of particular discourses" (Nayar 36). This discourse, formed by particular structure of language that conveys certain system of knowledge, has in the course of time been handed down from one generation to the other.

Nongkynrih's placing of the two types of women at two opposite ends of the binary in the poem indicates the stereotypes into which women are generally subjected. The image of the young girl is reminiscent of traditional portrayal of women in Khasi literature where a woman is the embodiment of chastity and meekness (Passah 320). In the poem, the idea of chastity is contrasted with images of Western influence especially in dress-code and lifestyle; suggested by the lines in the poem: "only once she wore a pair of demin jeans-/ she nearly lost her guileless look" (7-8). There is an indirect criticism of the "new woman" who has not been represented in conventional literature; the "dynamic, enterprising, resilent and courageous woman" (Passah 322) who dares to go against conventional norms and embrace unconventional modes of lifestyle. On the other hand, the poem also hints at the segregation among women that had taken place due to differing forms of lifestyle. The sense of entitlement that a man claims over a woman in a social construct also permeates through the criticism of the high class dames in the poem. Responding to a similar scenario, Cherrie L. Chhangte has voiced her resistance against being stereotyped in her poem "Plea" (2011), asserting that she would rather

be seen "as a person" who is "individualistic and selfish/ With personal quirks, But also personal needs" (8-12).

The rise of feminist critiques in nineteenth century commented on the presentation of the contrasting qualities of women into opposite ends of the pole in conventional English literature: "an angel in the house" and "the mad woman in the attic." As noted by Virginia Woolf in her 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own," conventional English literature of the nineteenth century portrayed women as unfriendly to each other and "have something very unpleasant up her sleeve" if she talks to another woman (116). According to feminism, a woman "is trained to fit into" the roles constructed by society (Nayar *Contemporary…* 83) that seeks to uphold patriarchy. Thus in dividing the women into two opposite ends of character, societal construct upholds patriarchy by creating differences between the performing women. The same is seen in the women portrayed by the poet Nongkynrih.

The picture of woman as a mother however, is rather different from that of women in general. Mothers occupy important places in shaping the life of a man. According to Brara, motherhood adds to the "self-image" (75) among South East Asian women as it "provides her a superior status and stable security compared to her wifely role" (75). In the poem, "Blasphemous Lines for Mother" (2011), Nongkynrih recounts the life that he has lived with his "cantankerous" mother and realizes her place of authority and influence in his adult life, saying:

if she had married again and not been

the cantankerous woman that she is,

I probably would not be standing

Here reading this poem today. (64-67)

Somewhat contrasted to his image of mother, less glorified but real, Robin Ngangom's "A Poem for Mother" (1988) talks about the mother who is a source of inexhaustible strength as she took up the task of looking after her family:

I know how you toil as all mothers do

for unmarried sons and ageing husband

and liberated daughters-in-law.

Worried about us, for a long time

your lips couldn't blossom into a smile. (23-27)

Although the two poets have given different perspectives to their respective mothers and have acknowledged the vital role of mothers within the family, the experiences of motherhood is much more complex and the "toil" of a mother cannot be fully comprehended by others. However, in the poem, "Mothers…" (2011) Temsula Ao brings out the pathetic condition of a widow whose husband had died in a cave-in and is nursing their third child. Ao's usage of images such as the bereaved mother/wife sitting "crumpled on the bare earth" and the hunger of the youngest child who could not be satiated by the mother's "shrunken breast" imply the devastation of the family following the death of the father. As a woman, Ao reveals the struggle of a breast-feeding mother who has resigned to her helplessness:

She wants to slap the child

when the tugging hurts

but there is no energy

even to lift her listless hand. (7-10)

From the above, what Ao has done is make a woman's voice felt in the subject of motherhood whereby the experiences of a nursing mother are seen through the lens of another woman. Through these lines, the differences in the opinion of motherhood from the male and female perspectives become evident. It is only through a mother herself that the struggles of motherhood can be voiced truthfully. This voice represented by Ao can be seen as part of the feminist response to recover the multitude of "silently active women, from the oblivion to which they have been thrust" (Sharma 1) by historiography. On the other hand, the portrayal of the selflessness of the mother is a "stereotype" that "still strives in the popular imagination." Despite their variances in the portrayal of mothers and motherhood, all the three poets have brought out the sacrificial heart of the mother who puts the needs of others before her own.

In the poem titled "Rites," (1988) Ao talks about the aftermath of physical intimacy, an experience which is quite different for the husband as it is the woman who has to bear the consequences of their act:

And when the sap is drawn

I preserve the effusion

Of the soul-searing ablution,

To cradle and nurse

The sapling

Of our spill

Until the following curse. (6-12)

Feminist critics have mentioned how in the projection of the woman as a weak and docile powerless being, she "is treated as a sex-object or a procreating machine" (Nayar *Contemporary…* 83) who is subjected to the power of the strong male figure. However, Ao's projection of physical intimacy can be seen as a subversion of the politics of gender and sexuality where a woman speaks of her own sexuality in what has been a male-dominated representation of gender. In asserting her role during physical act, she also subverts the traditional construction of gender. In other words, Ao breaks from the traditional norms of female representations by subverting male domination during "the self-giving rite" by asserting the role of the woman, saying:

I hold you deep within
The very best of you in
Primeval contact. (3-5)

In the next stanza, she continues to hold on to the image of female participation by stating that "the sap is drawn" (6), a phrase which is suggestive of female power. Yet in another poem titled "Confessional" (1992), Ao talks about her naivety towards her sexuality which remained "unawakened in maternity/ And stifled/ By matrimony" (6-8). As she goes on to confess about this, she tells her "lover, father/ And husband/ To [her] desires" (15-17) that she was unaware that she would find gratification through him by reiterating: "I did not know/ It was for you/ I had waited" in two stanzas of the poem. Thus, her awareness of female participation in the act of physical intimacy was not an independent knowledge but that stemmed from her relationship with a man.

The Indian social situation and the Northeast socio-political environment in respect of feminist influences and awareness are parallel phenomena, since patriarchies under various shades constitute social base. Postcolonial feminist theory critiques the "construction of gender difference…[and] representation of women in colonial and anti- colonial discourses" (Tyagi 45). It has been argued that women in postcolonial society experience "double colonization" firstly from the colonizers and secondly from their patriarchal society. Likewise, women writers are faced with the dual concern of patriarchal and colonial representation. In the essay, 'Post-colonial Women Writers,' Ketu H. Katrak notes that the writings of African, Indian and Caribbean women writers "share a concern with gender," referring to "how their female protagonist's self and sexuality are constructed and controlled by indigenous patriarchies and British colonial practices" (232).

When Ao talks about her sexuality, there are various signifiers that convey her dependence on the man who has become, not merely a lover but father and husband to her desires as well. Prior to the realization of her sexuality, Ao has called herself "virginal mother" (4) even though she is married. In her journey of discovering her sexuality, Ao portrays the ingrained construction of patriarchy in which a woman is dependent on a man. Thus, for Ao to come to the realization of female power, she needed the help of the man initially but did not submit to the power structure in sexuality for long.

While talking about the need to rethink genders, Kumkum Roy has commented that the realization of gender construction has given the opportunity to scholars to probe into "how gender relations changed" and look for "possibilities of transformation" (24). Looking at the poem from this view, Ao is found probing into the possibilities of bringing about change in gender relations by hinting at the power

yielded by the woman as well. A comparative reading of Nongkynrih's poem "Images of Love" (2006) on the same subject reflects how different the act of physical intimacy is to a man. Unlike the experience of a woman as seen in Ao's poem, there is no concern of the aftermath of the act but in the pleasure derived from it alone:

> And when I grow in passion
> and in stature,
> you bequeathed to me
> all the inlets of pleasure.
> O the final act!
> It's pure ecstasy…I'm borne aloft…It's pure delirium… (21-26)

The role of women within the family has never been disclaimed but rather, has been acclaimed in many works of literature. Their command over the family and their abilities to settle matters within the household have been given due. In the short story, *Civility is all that Counts* (2004), SJ Duncan brings out the importance of civility through the comical presentation of a man who tried to sell his old jeep but was duped twice by people he had thought were potential buyers. Being wary of cheats, he almost drove the other customers away until his wife intervened and sold the old jeep at a handsome sum. Brara has made a point that the role of a Northeast woman as a mother and a wife is different from each other:

> A woman's self-image in Northeast…is very much influenced by her role as a mother, which provides her a superior status and stable security compared to her wifely role. (75)

Nongkynrih has realized very early in his life that there was no point in arguing with his mother or being disobedient to her as he asserts in the poem "Blasphemous Lines for Mother" that "refusal was out of the question" (103-4). It was the mother who had the final say. In fact, in many poems of Nongkynrih we see the adverse effect of the mother's intervention in matters of the son's marriage.

That mothers are instrumental in bringing about such issues in the lives of their sons can be seen to reflect the problems with women empowerment. As noted by Brara, there are probings of change within the cultural set-up among women of the Northeast (80). There are attempts at modifying customary laws that are felt detrimental towards the cause of women. However, modifications of customary laws alone would not suffice the cause of women as long as there is no grass-root empowerment of women. Just as the women were "both oppressed and oppressors" (Paranjape 148) during mid-nineteenth century India, the women of the Northeast are both the oppressed and oppressors in their internalization of patriarchal society. In their refusal to accept another woman due to a demerit in the eyes of the society, they conform to the very mindset of the patriarchal system of thought that has privileged one woman over the other. This is evident in Ngangom's contradiction of two women in the family in the poem "A Poem for Mother" (1988) where in his praise for his mother's dedication to her family, he brings a contrast with the daughters-in-law:

> I know how you toil as all mothers do
>
> For unmarried sons and aging husband
>
> And liberated daughters-in-law. (23- 25)

Postcolonial feminist theory has commented on the creation of women as "national emblems" (Loomba 180) wherein women are expected to become mothers and hence produce children for the country. Following colonialism, the role of a woman extended not only to her home but to the nation where the image of the mother extended to the image of the nation-state as a mother. These dual images of the woman signify both "power" and "helplessness" of the woman as the image of the nation-mother "protected the son from colonial ravages" while she was "herself ravaged by colonialism and in need of her son's protection" (Loomba 182). During the fight for Indian national freedom, the role of the woman was elevated to the "older brahmanical notions of female self-sacrifice and devotion" which was fused with "Victorian ideal of the enlightened mother" in Europe (183) whose service was not required beyond the home.

However, since the British administrators were keen on different forms of colonialism in the Northeast (Chaube 12), many people, especially those among the hills were not exposed to the sweep of nationalist fervor that called for the participation of all the citizens towards the struggle for independence although they participated in their ethnic struggles for independence from India. There is therefore, a degree of difference in the experiences of women in the rest of India and women in the Northeast in their identification with the nation-state as a mother during the national struggle for independence. Yet deeply embedded in the cultural formations in the Northeast is the subjugation of the female in "providing a system of beliefs that seek and attain the woman's consent to be subordinated" (Nayar *Contemporary…* 84). This is evident in the portrayal of the selflessness of the mother and in her role as instructor of cultural markers.

One responsibility that has fallen on the lot of women is that they are seen as "bearers of culture" (Brara 78). Temsula Ao talks of her grandfather's legacy to her in the poem "The Old Story-teller" (2011) where he leaves her with the responsibility of telling stories to her children and grandchildren which she feels is her "racial responsibility":

> To instill in the young
> The art of perpetuating
> Existential history and essential tradition
> To be passed on to the next generation. (lines 35-38)

This tradition of story-telling is an important act through which racial memory is passed down from one generation to the next. Among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, the task of story-telling lay mostly in the hands of the women who would transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, as mentioned by Mamang Dai in "The Missing Link" (2001):

> I will remember then the fading voices
> of deaf women framing the root of light
> in the first stories to the children of the tribe. (21-23)

The projection of women as propagators of culture bear a differing light in the words of Nongkynrih. In the poem "Having Watched the Orange Trees, I am Moved to Sympathize with Women and Bastards" (2011), he highlights his feelings of dissent over inter-marriages between Khasi women and men from the outside. Comparing Khasi women to ripening oranges, he too has been tempted by the sight of the swelling oranges just like the men who are "gazing/ and boys with bamboo

sticks/ or catapults" (3-5). He expresses his feeling of disgust at the increasing population of "bastards" and asks a thought- provoking question to the women:

My sisters, have you seen a bumble bee

straying from pansy to pansy

on a sunny spring morning?

Listen to those wedding bells

tolling – do not give, do not give

to conquer. (13-18)

Poets of the Northeast are not only 'chroniclers" of their cultures; they also play conscious teachers to protect cultures by discriminating methods of self/ other paradigm. In the process, woman's freedom of choice is sacrificed even in the matter of love and marriage. The poet's attitude towards inter-racial marriages are seeped in the zeal of ethnic nationalism. The poem reflects what Brara notes is the "primary responsibility for transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge and practices…to succeeding generations" (78) that has been attributed to the responsibility of the woman. In Mamang Dai's "Let No Tear" (2006), a poem which talks about how a dying person is treated in her community, she brings out the difference of the roles of men and women:

The women will return to tell the stories.

The men will sit by you, strengthening,

strengthening ties and talking.

Quiet and cleansed

into that land of light we'll bid you move;
A mother's gaze embracing all grief
will kindle the chanting. (17-23)

Here, the women are the "bearers of culture" as they are the ones who narrate their beliefs in the afterlife while the men offer encouragements to the dying person. From the viewpoint of postcolonial feminist theory, assigning the women with this racial responsibility is a collaboration of colonialism and patriarchal tradition "to keep women 'in their place'" (Loomba 186). However, the extent to which this view of colonialism and patriarchy working together to limit the role of the women is questionable when taken in reference to the women of Northeast India. This is because the role of a mother in safekeeping her racial obligation has been stressed on even before the advent of colonialism in the region; especially among the familial construction of matriarchy in Meghalaya where the "sacred" relation between a mother and her children is compared to that of the relationship between Man and God, as suggested by the image of "the Mount of Heaven's Navel" in their folk stories (Nongkynrih *Around…* x) or, in the case of the Adi community where women would tell stories of the afterlife to motivate the soul of the dying person to cross to the other realm.

Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990) discusses on how women are subjugated by the myth of beauty which, in her words, is "like many ideologies of femininity" and which under patriarchy, "mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women's attempts to increase their power" (15). According to Wolf, as women grow older, they become wiser with age and experience (24). However, the long tradition of patriarchy seeks

the subversion of these older and wiser women through the myth of beauty. Her sense of confidence and self- awareness is stripped off her by the concept of beauty that privileges young women over old. She sounds right debunking that the beauty myth is "a political weapon against women's advancement" (19). This might be because the traditional patriarchy feels threatened in an environment of equality and freedom.

Ao talks about this issue of aging in her poem "The Coming of Age" (1988) where at forty years of age, she looks back to her younger self at twenty one years old who thought that turning forty would be "terrible" because it was "an age so remote/ And so removed/ From youth" (12-14). Despite the changes in her physical appearance at forty, Ao does not dispose any show of remorse or sorrow at growing old as she has learnt "how naïve [she] was/ At twenty-one" (33-34).

Discussing how the standard of beauty has been imposed on femininity, Wolf states that the assignment of the beauty myth to a certain period of age in a woman's life is to create divisions among women of various ages (24). This division will in turn create tensions among women through the creation of beauty myth which in reality is a modern invention to "an alternative feminine world" (27) where the powerful working women are "weakened psychologically" (27).

In the 1988 poem titled "Facades," Ao has talked about how her female self has learnt to conform to the pressures of patriarchy by going through facades of the self: as an academic, a domestic or a believer who fulfills each role assigned to her as per the expectations of the societal construct. Despite her success, Ao is not convinced of "this variegated/ Self/ In constant charade" (2-4). She sees the futility of these facades which are

held in the thrall
Of a world
That would admit of
Only the charade
Of the self (33-37).

Here, Ao does not only portray her dissatisfaction with the dictates of patriarchy but her ability to switch into the different roles imposed on her reveals two important issues. Ao, like other women in a patriarchal society is not free from internalizing the power structure of patriarchy. However, her ability to conform to the demands of patriarchy signifies the power that she eventually accumulates within the construct of patriarchy so that by the time she arrives at age forty, she is able to look back at her twenty-one year old self with amusement at the fear of growing old. In her latter poem titled "The Edge of Time" (2017), Ao dispossesses the same ambivalent attitude towards the facades "of wife, mother/ lover, friend, sister/ and universal do- gooder" (7-9) which has but left her "redundant/ and un-related" (13-14). In this poem, Ao has addressed the internalization of societal constructs that had for long led her to lead a life filled with facades. At the threshold of what she believes is "the edge of time," Ao voices out her resistance to her previous conformity to such societal constructs as she realizes that "time/ has erased your pretences/ in the race for relevance" (19-20) and getting caught up in the facades had only brought one "on the edge/ of a vast nothingness" (22-23).

Ao's "Lesson of the Mountain" (1992) is a discussion of her journey to the top of the mountain. She begins by stating the feeling of enthrallment at the sight of the mountain from the plain which she eventually conquers "through pain…/through

peril" only to realize that there was nothing majestic about being on the top of the mountain. This is because from the mountain top, she sees more height in the sky and an expanse in the horizon which remains yet to be conquered by her. Although this poem can be read as symbolizing Ao's attainment of her doctoral degree, this poem also reveals Ao as a woman who has beat odds against her. It is also a poem that signifies the growing self-awareness of a woman who has grown wiser with age and experience.

Through her poems, Ao has constantly brought out the importance of self-awareness in a society that threatens individuality. The journey from the twenty-one year old self to "the coming of age" self at forty and the journey to the top of the mountain has given her an assertion of the self where in the poem "My Hundredth Birthday" (1992), the poet is now able to look forward to turning a century old where she hopes to see an eventful reunion of her growing family. Yet, this is not to say that in the process of self-awareness and coming to terms with growing old, Ao is freed from the issue of growing older. In fact, in the poem "Old" (1992), Ao has dwelt on the issues that come with age: "aches and pains/ Only loss, no more gains" (8-9), or the "lethargy/ Of a body" (11-12) where "loneliness and desolation/ Today or tomorrow/ No longer matter" (21-24). In this poem, we see the preoccupation of the poet with age which is quite different from her earlier preoccupation with age in the poem "The Coming of Age." Here, Ao is no longer worried about physical appearances as she had been in her twenties with growing old as she has realized that there are more realistic problems entailed by age beyond the beauty myth.

Yet it is not only women who are ensnared by the beauty myth. Wolf states that both men and women are psychologically victimized by this beauty myth which

"women must want to embody" and "men must want to possess women who embody it" (21). In the poem "The Heart Accepts" (1992), Nongkynrih reveals the importance of beauty when describing his friend's wedding. The poem begins with the poet returning to his village and meeting his old friends. Late in the night, the friends gather and talk of the beauty of the bride. The apprehension of the poet-friend towards the bride is revealed when he describes her as "the friend-stealing bride" (45). However, the apprehension of the poet fades away soon as he sees the beauty of the bride: "a snow-white glow,/ a smiling face/ and silver tears" (47-49). The description of the bride by the poet and his subsequent feeling of finding another friend in his friend's bride reveal how the poet is subjected to the beauty myth as well.

Apart from physical beauty, the myth of beauty glorifies youth and virginity because "they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance" (Wolf 24). This gradual preference of youth over age has been described by Nongkynrih in his 2005 poem "Late-in-the-night (For Amanda)" where, as he grows into gradual awareness of growing older, he wonders if he should "turn to a girl, hopefully a virgin and young enough to be [his] student" (66-67). The irony the poet brings out in the poem is that while he was younger, he was attracted to "a woman old enough to be [his] aunt" (64-65). However, the poet's attitude towards the possibility of choosing his choice of women signifies that "the beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (Wolf 24).

Although Wolf's critique on power relation shows that men are also as much subordinated by the discourse of beauty, there are times when poems written by male poets of the Northeast suggest their feeling of oppression under the construct of their society. In the poem "The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom" (2006), the poet

brings out the intricate layers of his society that seems to become increasingly complicated as changes take place due to outside forces to such an extent that the poet feels compelled to write in the IV section of the poem: “maybe all men are tired of being men,/ maybe we have acknowledged death” (70).

It is no surprise to see that Foucault’s concept of power that has been a discursive construct which privileges one over the other has been echoed by poets in many of their works. While Nongkynrih’s poems reveal the struggles of a man in a matriarchal society, Ngangom’s poems attest to Foucault’s concern that “power is everywhere” (63). He brings out the helplessness of his people by addressing to the totalitarian nature of rule where “nothing is certain” (Strange Affair, III.15): the poet states that prices of oil and pulses, food and transport are as uncertain as the “outside world” and the closedness of his state from the rest of the country has only compounded the suffering of his people as everything seems to have a price: “Even/ fire water and air/ are bought and sold” (Strange Affair, III. 22- 24).

As a visitor to his people and their concerns comes to view, the poet feels small as a human among them. Ngangom brings to mind the Foucauldian approach to power which states that the present society is “a disciplinary society” wherein discipline is maintained by different institutions: schools, prisons, military and so on. According to Foucault (1990), this form of discipline is “a mechanism of power that regulates the thought and behavior of social actors through subtle means” (139) which implies that discursive discipline is internalized by the common people who become subservient to the power that controls them.

As a poet living outside the state, Ngangom has never been segregated from his homeland since emotionally connected by memory, he carries it with him in the

poem "Everywhere I Go…" (2006). The news that he hears about his homeland devastates him. However, the poet expresses his bafflement with his people who show no sign of distraught despite the news of terror and war within the state, as he says: "…whenever I touch my homeland's streets/ everyone seems happy and have no grouses" (33-34). He fails to understand the seemingly placid state of his people who live within the state while outside the state, there are discussions on his homeland by intellectuals who have little knowledge of his native land but "speak the language of progress" (23). Such is the poet's feeling of difference from his people that he says of himself, "Perhaps I am the only one who broods about his land" (28). In this poem, the difference between people who live under the disciplinary society and those who are unaffected by the same society is clearly seen. Having internalized the "mechanisms of power" that dictate their way of life, the people living within his state dispose a complacent attitude despite the uncertainty that prevail in their land because they have been disciplined by power. According to Foucouldian thought, power "derives its strength from the fact that the subject deeply believe in what it tells them, for it gives a sense of belonging and contributes to their well being" (Mambrol). Thus, the complacency of the people living within the state is because their submission to the structure of power may bring them their well-being. The poet, however, is skeptical about the discourse of power. He feels that somehow nature will react against the construct of the society, saying: "Maybe the land is tired/ of being suckled on blood,/ maybe there is no peace/ between the farmer and his fields" (The Strange Case…70).

Foucouldian concept of power does not end in the recognition of discourse but in the resistance of its discourse as well. To Foucoult, power, although being an omnipresent discourse, is "coextensive with resistance;" having said himself of

resistance in his *History of Sexuality* that "where there is power, there is resistance" (36). Yet, this resistance to discourse is productive because it brings about changes within any type of relationship. This can be applied to some of the works of the poets of Northeast where there are reflections of productive resistance to discourse: when Ao resists the power relation between a husband and a wife, she finds a new identity within her by which she becomes aware of her individual strength. Likewise, Nongkynrih's resistance to matriarchy in his society is not of revolution alone but it questions the validity of matriarchy in an age where shifts in power relations have taken place.

For those people who do not understand the intricacies of the different traditions and cultures of the people living in Northeast India, there have been times when incorrect assumptions are being made regarding their ways of life. In the poem, "The Conquest" (2011), Kharmawphlang ends his poem that has portrayed the troubled history of his homeland by the words of an outsider who has no idea of the torments that the land had gone through:

> One of them told me, 'You know,
>
> Yours is a truly metropolitan city.' (26-27)

Despite bearing the image of a metropolis, poets of the region have vented out on the restrictions that one faces due to culture and traditions which contests the idea of the cities of Northeast India as inherently cosmopolitan in outlook and thinking. Using the medium of poetry, poets have taken up the role of "chroniclers" by projecting their present reality thereby resisting incorrect assumptions of the region and the people. Ngangom talks about the dilemma he had faced when he fell in love

with a woman from different culture in the poem, “To a Woman from Southeastern Hills” (2006)

> In you, woman from southeastern hills
> all our memories gather into trembling hopes,
> taking us back to a time before they gave us
> religion to divide us, before the politician-priests
> who labored for their own redemption,
> mouthing the name of god among benighted heathens. (30-35)

In this poem, Ngangom talks about the cultural issues that run deep within among the people of the Northeast. In such cases, inter-racial marriages and affairs are not easily observed despite the apparent freedom that most youths have in choosing their potential partners. Nongkynrih’s poem “Sundori” (2009) also brings in the plight of inter-racial relationship between two people whose predicament depend on the peace between the two races:

> Yesterday one of my people
> Killed one of your people
> And one of your people
> Killed one of my people…
> But it is neither you nor I…
> I send this message
> Through a fearful night breeze,
> Please leave your window open. (2-14)

In his critique on the poetry written by poets of Northeast India, Ananya S. Guha commends on the poets’ tendency to “transmute the chaotic into the subliminal”

(Guha *North-east Poetry…*). Perhaps this is so because the poets dispose the attitude to revert to their traditions and norms against their desires. In his love poem to the woman in the Southeastern Hills, Ngangom accepts her wish to remain obligated to her tribe rather than asking her to rebel against her social set-up. In fact, in many of Mamang Dai's poems, there are reflections of her submission to the greater powers beyond her. In the poem "Ties," she talks of the relationship that two people do not talk about which remain but "the secrets/ of [her] clenched heart" (4-5). Like Ngangom, it is not by revolting against tradition but by submitting to it that she finds peace:

> In these hills,
> the centre of being,
> one by one
> voices are extinguished.
> Exorcised,
> blameless,
> blameless. (lines 26-32).

In the poem "Gone," Dai brings out the same tone of submission as she speaks of the impending parting, knowing that "this is the way that was promised us" (29). This same withdrawal is seen in Nongkynrih's poem "I Remember" (1992) where he talks about a girl he wooed "by her gate/ as if [his] life depended on her love" (4-5). Despite that, the poet accepts her rejection by submitting to her will, saying: "man proposes/ woman disposes" (23-24). These voices that conform to the society perhaps, evoke in the readers what Guha calls is "the poetry of peace; out of disorderliness, an orderliness." As Misra has noted in her Introduction to *Writings*

from North-east India (2011), while there are projections of violence and terror, "there are quite a few which deal sensitively with the theme of human endurance and the beauty of relationships in the midst of terror and violence" (xxx).

In his Introduction to *Earth Songs: Stories from the North-east*, KC Baral discusses one of the chief characteristics of the different genres of literary outputs in the Northeast as "seeking for some kind of wholeness in the face of disintegration and fragmentation" (xi). In fact, readers of poetry written by poets of Northeast find "ambivalence" (Guha *North-east Poetry*) as a marked characteristic in the treatment of their subjects and themes. According to Guha, this ambivalence transcends into love: love not merely of fellow mankind but also love for the land and culture. Although the poets speak of issues that they feel are detrimental towards the progress of their society, or express their resistance to power relations within their society, their love for their land is never diminished. Poets cannot be expected to follow politically correct lines even in the midst of heartaches and pain of rejection, the poets seek to find "wholeness" by accepting that "nothing is ended/ but it is changed" (Dai: 12).

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CHAPTER FOUR

CLAIMING ETHNIC IDENTITY

The question of identity is an emotive issue having serious implications among the tribes of Northeast India. Identity is an important factor that marks an individual into a community having its own regional identity. Inhabited by different groups of people who have settled down in the region in different times, the Northeast is home to various ethnic entities; leading to the presence of great diversity "in terms of language, dress code, food habits, and ethnic composition" (Mahanta 98). The complex nature of identity in the Northeast owes to the existence of religious differences, "the morphological ethnic divide between the upland and lowland communities," and "the socio-anthropological tribal and non-tribal divide" (Rajkumar 47). This complexity is compounded by the "blurring of ethnic boundaries by people who cross and renegotiate their political and cultural boundaries" (Moral 116). Unlike anywhere else, "the heterogeneous nature of the composition and mix of various ethnicities confined within a very small physical area" (Rajkumar 47) in the Northeast has added to the complexity of identity politics in the region. Because of the Northeasterners' multifaceted disconnect from national identity, regional identity is the dominant marker which has become a sensitive issue in times as more and more sub-identities within the region have striven for their political independence. Eventually, this has led to ethnic clashes in the region as "identity politics are hijacked by insurgent groups" (Mahanta 105) which has resulted in swirls of violence time after time.

Poetry being a cultural product, its practitioners in the Northeast are sensitive respondents of varied and even contradictory forces playing in their lives. They are not only aware of the forces of influence impacting from the outside, but they also

look into their own internal factors which contradictorily mould their poetic sensibility in order to appreciate things of heritage and identity formation.

Identity formation in the Northeast has undergone tremendous changes in course of time. Due to the nature and pattern of their migration, Chaube has mentioned that "racial purity" among many tribes of the Northeast is questionable (2). Identity theorists have stated that identity, like ethnicity, is rather a construct of the "by-products of political and extraneous considerations to derive personal or political mileage whenever the situation demands" (Rajkumar 25). Thus, the nature of identity is not always exclusive but malleable according to the needs of those in power. This distinct characteristic of identity in the Northeast did not escape the attention of the British administrators who in their accounts of the people of the region talked about the problem of differences among the people not only in terms of spoken language but also of geographical locations (Chaube 32).

However, these differences that existed among the people of the Northeast provided the British administrators with an advantage over the natives. One of the chief tactics employed by the colonists was to explore and capitalize on differentiation among the people, as observed by Loomba:

> Ethnic, tribal and other community groupings are social constructions and identities that have served to both oppress people and radicalize them. (106)

Thus the politics of identity that had already existed among the people of the Northeast was readily identified by the British administrators who were keen on keeping the various divisions among the people in order to rule over them easily (Deka 4). The British administrators allowed the continuity of chieftainship only through "formalized authority" where the traditional role of the chiefs had but been

done away with and laws were formulated in tandem with the existing tribal laws and practices (Chaube 36). This was necessary because colonialism depended on maintaining "class distinctions and ideologies" in order to create capitalism (Loomba 110). As stated by Deka, the British policy of isolating the tribes of Northeast India from the nation-state worked for the colonizers as "ethnicity took precedence over nationalism" (5) among the people.

Colonialism upheld class distinctions not only among the people of the Northeast but also between the colonized and the colonizers. According to Loomba, it not only created but "manipulated" identities (106) for the benefit of the colonizers. Eventually subjugated by colonial discourse and stereotype, the different people of the Northeast were brought under one broad category now known as "Scheduled Tribes." This categorization has been made based on factors like "primitive traits, distinctive features and cultures, geographical isolation, religious beliefs, shyness of contact with the world…and backwardness" (Rajkumar 232). In the poem "Rez" (2009), the Mizo poet Mona Zote talks about the predicament of living in a "reservation" where she situates the similar experiences of her people with that of the American Indians living in reservations. Through images such as "AK- 47" (9), "Virtual Viktor" (38), "aboriginal" (45) and comparing "Adonis or Umrao Jaan" (57) among many, the poem suggests an unsurpassing breadth of knowledge of an intellectual who is but in a restricted area. Commenting on the prejudices that people living outside the reservation have on those living within, the speaker in the poem tells the listener, here, the boy, not to remain passive:

if they ask you about life on the reservation
if they say they want to hear about stilt- houses
and the dry clack of rain on bamboo

and the preservation of tribal ways

give them a slaughter. (31-35)

Categorization of people into different groups for administrative purpose has a long-term effect on formation of identity as it leads to the creation of binary oppositions where one group becomes the subordinate to the other, leading to the development of the feeling of inferiority among the people that belonged to the minority (Deka 5). Zote's poem echoes the internalization of being in a reserved area where "a long tradition of self-enforced isolation" (21) has "exacerbated" (20) the youths who have grown disillusioned by the unchanging rhythm of life:

Out here *this place never changes, never will*

We will keep choosing grey salt, bad roads,

Some thin yellow flowers to grieve, *alcohol over friendship…*

Cash for peace. (4-7 *Italics as textually given*)

Colonialism has not only rejected many ethnic ways of life and cultural practices, but it has also affected the minds of the people where concepts of the West have been increasingly internalized by younger generations who are more susceptible to the progress and developments that have been brought about by science and technology, modern education, religion and globalization. Since its earliest inception, colonialism as an institution has brought about a cultural divide wherein the natives who eventually have imbibed colonial binaries began to adapt to what has been considered as the stronger of the two accordingly. This acculturate stress has not only "shaped and reshaped the cultural identities of most communities in the Northeast" but "Christianity has added another dimension to cultural loss and recovery" (Gahatraj 418). In course of time, they have become, in the words of

Kharmawphlang (2011), "their own worst enemies," (60) by becoming culturally alienated.

In the poem "The Old Story Teller" (2011), Ao talks about the great divide that has taken place between the young and old in her community that is reflected within her family saying that "a new era has dawned./ Insidiously displacing the old" (39-40) where stories of old have been dismissed "as ancient gibberish/ From the dark ages, outmoded/ In the present times" (42-44). It is this very attitude towards the signifiers of their cultural identity by the youths that has prompted Kharmawphlang (2011) to remark, in "Letter from Pahambir" that his generation is the "forgetful" one, prone to cultural oblivion (13-14).

Following postcolonial attempt at recovering one's past, poets of the region have used the medium of poetry as a platform to assert their ethnic identity. Because postcolonial writings seek to recover from colonial stereotyping, poets have negotiated with their present hybridized identity by going back to their mythic past where the folk elements become "a forked weapon of assimilation and dissemination" (Syiem 218) and they have used the medium of poetry to "write back" in order to claim their ethnicity against colonial stereotypes.

Ao's cultural identity as seen through two of her poetical works, "Stone-People from Lungterok" (1992) and "Blood of Others" (2011) reveals the development of ethnicity in the assertion of her identity. As commented by Margaret Ch. Zama, the concept of identities in the contemporary age is highly ambiguous in its ability to undergo through processes of change, to the extent of the changes made possible in one's gender through modern science and technology (6). In such situations, the idea of fixed identity is redundant as identity is an ever-changing

concept. This changing aspects of identity is well documented in a comparative reading of Ao's earlier works with those of the latter. In the earlier poem, Ao identifies herself with her community whose history according to their myth began from the six stones at Lungterok. The poem directly contests colonial historiography in its description of the history, intellect, art and craft, warfare and indigenous religion of the Ao- Naga people. Through the employment of analogy, Ao compares both the binaries of her people seen from two angles: from that of the outsiders' perception as written in history and other documents and the other, as seen from the insider. However, in the latter poem, the poet, as a chronicler of events in the history of her people does not merely contest colonial historiography but has explored the various mechanisms of acculturate stress that had taken place in the history of her people through their contact with the outsiders.

Stating the impact of Christianity in the identity formation of the Ao- Nagas, Ao presents the confusion that they were led into by the introduction of a new religion that sought to do away with their indigenous one which was dismissed by the missionaries as "nothing but tedious primitive nonsense" (20):

> We listened in confusion
> To the new stories and too soon
> Allowed our knowledge of other days
> Be trivialized into taboo. (41-44)

However, as time progressed, ethnic awareness manifested among the Ao-Nagas, for "a mere century of negation' was unable to "erase/ the imprints of intrinsic identities/ Stamped on minds since time began" (53-56), leading the people to revisit their past which was not an act of pleasure:

The suppressed resonance of old songs
And the insight of primitive stories
Resurface to accuse leased-out minds
Of treason against the essential self. (57-60).

The influence of Christianity among the people of the Northeast has its lasting impact on the formation of identity. As pointed out by Chaube, missions in the Northeast entered after British administration had established itself in the hills (50). Unlike Bengal where Christianity was ushered in by intellectual movement, Christianity in the Northeast came "through administrative policy" (51) and became the forefront of administrative tools where by the late 1800s, missionaries, and not the administrators, began to live among the people and imparted them with Western education and provided them with medical care. Although initially, the British administrators' policy was to "disturb the social equilibrium as little as possible," it was the Church that disrupted power relations (61) in the hills as it eventually became "a centre of power and patronage in the hill districts" (60). Although the influence of the Church among the people in the hill districts brought about many positive changes, its subversion of ethnicity has been questioned by poets in their quest for ethnicity. The relevance of the institution of the Church has been questioned and its inability to uphold its teachings have been explored by Mona Zote in her poem "What Poetry Means to Earnestina in Peril" (2011). Confessing of her people that "Religion has made drunks of us all" (33), Zote describes the duality of the Church in Mizoram:

I like a land where babies
are ripped out of their graves, where the church

leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad marriages
quite out of proportion to the current population, and your neighbour
is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint
and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept
by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands.

(26- 32 Italics as in the original text)

In the poetical works of Temsula Ao, the influence of Christianity was imperative in her first volume of poetry, *Songs That Tell* (1988) where images pertaining to Christianity abound in poems like "Blessings," "Lazarus," "The Healing Touch," "The Serpent and I" and "The Judgement" where the poet lends her poetical interpretations to Biblical allusions and incidents, infusing her individuality and artistry as a poet into them. However, the persona of the poet who has challenged accepted norms has already expressed itself through poems like "Blessings" and "Musings During a Sermon." In the poem "Blessings" (1988), Ao takes on Christ's Sermon on The Mount or The Beatitudes as found in the Gospel According to Matthew chapter 5. In the Biblical passage, there are two references to whom "the kingdom of heaven" would belong: both verses 3 and 10 ends with the line, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Ao begins her poem with the words, "Blessed are the poor" (1) which resounds with the Biblical "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3) but the poet deviates from the Biblical passage by inserting her interpretation of the less privileged people like "the poor/ in rags" (1-2), "the blind" (11), "The deaf/ and the dumb" (15/16), "the lame" (20) and "the unborn" (26). Bringing into picture all these less fortunate people not mentioned in the Bible, Ao ends her poem with lines that speak of her disillusionment:

Blessed are these all

For theirs is the kingdom

That never was. (35-37)

The poem "Musings During a Sermon" (1988) also deals with the poet's disillusionment with Biblical conception of the idea of heaven. Intrigued by the sermon, Ao goes on thinking

Heaven must be a peculiar place

Where there is no day, no night

No need of sun. (1-3)

The idea of the changes that would take place in heaven causes the poet to think of heaven quite differently. Instead of having the desire to arrive at the place where "there will be no crying/ But only perpetual singing" (4-5), the poet is led to believe that "heaven must be a monotonous place/ With only the present continuing" (15-16). The poem ends with the poet dismissing the idea of heaven saying

Ah, for me, a life of diversity!

Deliver me from an eternity

Of uncurious monotony. (33-35)

In the poem "Rites" of the second volume of poetry *Songs That Try to Say*, (1992) where she asserts her role as a performing other in a sexual act, she anticipates for what the act ensues; which is her pregnancy. The second stanza of the poem ends with the employment of the term "curse" (12), a term which is reminiscent of Biblical allusion. In Genesis chapter 3 of the Bible, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, alongwith the tempter, the serpent received their punishment from God because of their disobedience to His commandment, which was not to eat

from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Pronouncing different punishments to the three defaulters, God told Eve the woman that He would

> Greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;
> In pain you shall bring forth children;
> Your desire shall be for your husband,
> And he shall rule over you. (Genesis 3: 16)

Ao's allusion to this punishment of God to all the woman thereafter is reflective of the internalization of Biblical teachings; the validity of which she questions in her latter poem "Blood of Others" (2011) where Ao, assuming the role of a chronicler, presents the history of her tribe from "the bygone days of the other life" (1) till the present times when "new breed of cultural heroes/ Articulate a different discourse/ And re- designate new enemies" (62-64). In fact, the poem "Blood of Others" conveys the mood of orality where the poet in short phrases describes the progression of the Ao- Nagas from their beginning as indicated by the myth of Lungterok to the present time when they have re-awakened from their placid existence and began to fight for their ethnicity. This poem is an important indicator of the changes that had taken place within the psyche of the Ao- Nagas as a community that has collectively resisted against the forces of colonialism in the present time. Moreover, a comparative reading with Ao's earlier poem "Stone-people from Lungterok" also reveals the changes that had taken place within Ao as an individual. Through the poetical works of Ao, it can be seen that the process of imbibing the need for cultural assertion was not an immediate act but a gradual realization of the poet who through her acceptance of her role as a chronicler and a storyteller began to realize the importance of retrieving their past.

Contacts with missionaries and subsequent contact with Western education slowly but gradually brought about changes within the tribal community as traditional roles of the chiefs and dormitories were banned by the administrators. Traditional means of living also underwent through changes as there were various job opportunities in government offices. In course of time, like other colonized countries, Western ways of life and indigenous ways of life mingled together and eventually led to the formation of new identity.

In his assessment of early post-colonial writers of the 1950s and 1960s, Nayar asserts that nation-building being the foremost preoccupation of these early post-colonial writers, the first objective was to dismantle "Western constructions of their nations as primitive, savage, and ancient" which means that they sought to "reconstruct the nation without the frames of reference used by the colonial masters" (68). It was thus the quest of the postcolonial writer to look for other frames of reference that did not yet exist in colonial discourse in order to create a nation. According to Nayar, "the use of myth, collective memory, and the appeal to a common history" (70) became the cornerstone for writers seeking to build a nation that rejected colonial discourse and pave their own identity.

To the tribal community, myths are not mere stories but "primitive history and ethnology expressed in poetic form" whose truth is "irrelevant" (Elwin xxi). Acknowledging that myths and legends are "only folk history or ethno-history and cannot be accepted as history proper," Datta states that they are important nonetheless because "they can certainly supply useful raw ingredients and provide clues to missing links" (126). In his discussion of the general characteristics of postcolonial writers, Nayar has argued that in their dealing with "space" (71), postcolonial writers are firmly located to their communities because "territorial sovereignty, boundaries,

maps and routes are integral to the very idea of the nation" (71). Likewise, as postcolonial writers, poets from Northeast India have used myths and folktales in their poems thereby locating themselves to their communities in order to reclaim the idea of the nation as opposed to colonial discourse.

In recent years, toponymy, the study of the names of places have given rise to many postcolonial communities reclaiming places of names that had been changed or deleted (Yeh 120) following colonialism. In poetry, the attempt to place oneself in a community or the placement of the significance of places in their poetry can be viewed as literary exercise of postcolonial toponymy in that this act is the poets' reclamation of their land, similar to the changes of place names due to postcolonial toponymy. Just as "naming a place is a process for the people to tame the space" in geographical terms, the naming of a place in poetical works is important for the poets for, just as in geography "every place name represents the collective life and memory of their group" naming places is the act of reclaiming one's space against the "territorial sovereignty, boundaries, maps and routes" that they have been subjected to as a nation (147). When Dai talks of the origin of the Adi in the poem "Birthplace" (2004), she seeks to claim her indigenous space against the colonial mappings of places by drawing boundaries:

> 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. (1-5)

Colonial discourse has placed the natives at "treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy" and has not opened up space for them to "produce a history of civil progress" (Bhabha 60). However, Dai reclaims space for the Adi people through her poetical work by asserting that they had begun not from anywhere else but from elements of nature in the place that they were living in, ending the poem with two effective lines: "We descend/ from solitude and miracles" (21-22). Thus the poem is a reclamation of the ethnic space of the Adi people, their birthplace where "clan by clan [they] grew" (11).

According to Fanon, it is when a colonized person who has abandoned his ethnicity and embraced the colonizers' culture has undergone "a definitive, an absolute mutation" (19), dispossessing an air of superiority over his fellow-men because in his embracing of the colonizer's culture he feels like he has become "elevated." In fact, "he wants to emphasize the rupture that has now occurred" (36) within him so much so that he becomes unintelligible to his own people (37). In Ao's poem "The Old Story-teller" (2011), we see a similar reversal of this situation where the old stories are no longer intelligible to the younger generation. The reaction of the youths to their myths reveals the "mutation" and amnesia that they had gone through as a nation of colonized people; wherein this mutation seems to become aggravated in due course of time. It is in this stage that the poets become negotiators through their intellectual reclamation of the old stories thus bridging the gap between the past and the present in order to assert the relevance of the old stories despite the long process of oblivion.

Elwin has mentioned that "a deep vein of poetic imagination" is a natural quality inherent among many tribal people (xxi). Considering the fact that orality was the medium of imparting knowledge till the advent of missionaries in the region by

the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that the poets of the Northeast naturally rely on their myths and folklore to counter colonial discourse; as echoed by Dai when she says, "From songs we were made." Asserting the role of myths in tribal consciousness, Kharmawphlang has written that:

> Myths construct themselves
> like the birthing of these urns
> and vessels, deft hands
> printing the metaphors of substance. (Dancing Earth, 144).

In fact, poems written by poets of Northeast India are often noted for their "rootedness" in the poets' "conscious attempt to adopt elements from their own oral tradition" as they strive to create a literary field that would "resist the colonial project of a denial of history or literature to the colonized" (T. Misra xvii). As Larry Neal has suggested in developing a black aesthetic tradition, myth and folklore are "essential to an artist" because they are "collective, shared, communitarian and not individual" (Nayar *Postcolonial…* 221). Likewise, to the poets of the region, myths and folklore become essential assets towards the attempt of creating a different voice against colonial discourse through the medium of poetry. Mamang Dai feels that myths and legends are means of identification through which the people "recognize each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community" (*Glimpses*, 5). Thus, myths and legends are fundamental to asserting the regional identity of the people in the Northeast against the stereotypical identity that has been formulated by colonial discourse.

In the poem "Song of Dancers" (2004), Dai talks about the intrinsic relationship of orality and performing arts in her community. In a footnote to the

poem, Dai explains that the ritual Ponung dance is performed by young girls during their festival known as Solung where the priest "recounts the legends of birth and creation" (20). The dance and the chant together instill in the community a reawakened sense of identity in that myths and lores sound like incidents that had taken place just a day ago; as the poem gives the feeling of continuity in the priest's chants, saying

> Yesterday, yesterday the world began
> In captive voice chanting the sky and earth
> and rocks weeping rain,
> from songs we were made. (24- 27)

To the people celebrating the Solung festival, these myths will never cease to instill in them a sense of community as the dance enacted alongwith the chant continue to reaffirm their identity. In his analysis of the Adi myths of the people of Arunachal Pradesh, Elwin has mentioned that the myths are "original" and do not bear "motifs of Indian folklore" while at the same time, reveal traces of outside influence (xx). Thus, myths are not mere stories alone but are also repository of contacts with the outside world wherein knowledge systems are expanded and affected. In her essay "Oral Narratives and Myth," Mamang Dai has answered pertinent questions on the relevance of myths and stories in today's world, believing that "myth and memory have their role" in the quest of beginning (5). To a tribal community, myths and stories are significant because "they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded on memory and the magic words" (5). Similarly, the mythic space reflects "the construction of nations, kinship, and cultures, while… reiterating the myth of origins and sources" (Nayar 75).

In several of her poems, Ao has attempted to use poetry as "voices that bear traces of ethnic identity" through myths and legends as she had learnt of the intrinsic relation between ethnic identity and myths from her Grandfather who had told her that "forgetting the stories/ would be catastrophic:/ We would lose our history,/ Territory, and most certainly/ Our intrinsic identity" as expressed in "The Old Story-teller" (2011).

According to Longkumer, myths and legends are fundamental to the lives of the Naga people since "the very history of the Naga people, their religion and entire social life is shaped" by the oral tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation (11). Oral tradition has been used not only as a communicator but also as a recorder of all walks of life including formation of village, wars and intra- village conflict resolutions. It is thus imperative that the older generation in the community see to it that "youngsters were trained not only to learn but to master" their oral traditions so that one would be able to narrate them when situation demands (11). However, colonialism disrupted the oral tradition of the Naga as it brought about alterations in the cultural and oral traditions where the new Acts of governance passed by the British administration imposed laws that "undermined" the existing tradition of tribal customs and laws (12). This had rendered the relevance of the oral tradition to a lesser degree of importance as these new Acts overshadowed the traditional ones, eventually, causing the decadence of orality among the people. The tragic environment of the Nagas having no common language or script or having diverse ethnic languages points to the fact that English remains as a useful mode of expression. Yet there are limitations of expressing the essential ethnic imports in the adopted language.

In the poem titled “The Missing Link” (2004), Mamang Dai talks about the intricate relationship between the people of her community and nature. In the poem, Dai reveals that the river Siang, which had been called “the missing link” by British surveyors because they could not place the connecting link between the rivers Tsangpo and Brahmaputra (12), had been part of the history of her people even before the advent of British administrators into their territory. Highlighting the importance of orality, she states that “there are no records” (14) but that they had nowhere else to be born and belong, “if not of memory/ divining life and form out of silence” (27-28).

Dai in this poem states that her racial memory comes from two voices etched on her mind: that of deaf women who tell stories to the children and the river Siang which she claims, is “the green and white vein of our lives” (15). Here, the poet brings in the intricate relationship of her people with their myths and oral tradition. As the old women impart the young with stories of old, the poet makes it clear that it is the listener who has to keep the stories alive by the act of remembrance. Implying the importance of remembrance, the poet repeats the two voices that she needs to remember; then goes on to assure herself why she needs to “remember, because nothing is ended/ but it is changed” (32- 33). She implores with herself to remember the voices because “memory is a changing shape” that had been attested by time and places. Of remembrance and memory, Dai has written that “the role of memory becomes crucial and remembrance of the word became the art of the storyteller, the orator, the medicine man, the priest” (6).

However, the act of remembrance is not a simple exercise of the mind to keep one’s history alive. It involves politics more complicated than “a quiet act of introspection and retrospection” (Bhabha 90). It is a conscious act of retrieving the

past because “nothing is ended” and amidst the cycle of assimilation and appropriation of cultural capitals that are in constant change due to globalization, the marginal society undergoes through changes. In such situation, remembrance is an act of “a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha 90). The pain that embodies the visitor of the mythic past vary according to the person. For Ao, the process of remembering the history of her people in order to fulfill her “racial responsibility” and to try to instill in the hearts of the younger generation brought her painful dejection as she realizes that the younger generation had rejected their history as “ancient gibberish.”

In the poem titled “Cherra” (1992), the poet Nongkynrih finds that the lively hometown that he used to remember by had changed tremendously. He sees nothing in his hometown that people had spoken of in great wonders; in fact, he feels like he does not have anything to praise his hometown with, leading him to compare his fate with Lalyngngi, who according to Khasi folklore had missed the important cultural dance of creatures due to her vanity:

> What is this hushed quiet
>
> In woodlands that yet survive?
>
> Why don’t your fisherman
>
> Angle from your creeks?
>
> …
>
> Like little late Lalyngngi who missed her dance,
>
> I choose too late to sing. (12- 21)

For Nongkynrih, as he had stated in his essay "The Writer and the Community: A Case for Literary Ambidexterity" (2006), poetry becomes the medium through which he reminds his people of the "virtues of their ancestors' ways and the necessity of perpetuating them." In many of his poems, Nongkynrih has brought in elements from the mythic past and incorporate them into daily life; just as the Adi narrator of their myths during the Solung festival made them come alive. In his series of poems on his visit to his hometown Cherra, the poet evokes Khasi myths and folktales naturally and without any affectation.

In a series of poems titled "A Day in Cherrapunjee," Nongkynrih brings to life the different stories associated with certain places and waterfalls as he narrates the stories to Ruby. In the second poem "Dianthlen," the poet tells Ruby the story of the serpent who ate human beings and tells her how it was killed "by the wisdom of our forefathers / who poured red-hot iron bars/ into his feasting belly" (p. 25). The third poem is "Likai," which is the name of a waterfall that has been called after a woman named Likai who has jumped to her death after she realized that she had eaten her daughter because it was "the only thing she knew/ could give her peace" (p.30). In the fourth poem, the poet narrates the story of a beautiful maiden named Sngi Thiang who had fallen in love with a childhood friend who was but an orphan. Because her family did not approve of their relationship, the man was "abused" by her family "who fled in shame" to the plains of Surma (p. 33-34), resulting in the heart-broken Sngi Thiang to jump off to "seek refuge in the ravine below,/ where emerald ponds/ like ponds of paradise, awaited your harried soul" (p. 34). In the last poem of the series, Nongkynrih relates the story of Khoh Ramhah, a strong giant who was "a bugbear of a man/ who terrorized people like an evil spirit" (p. 36). The

poet tells Ruby of how the "people that had killed the Thlen" killed him by "feeding his gargantuan mouth/ with *jasnam* mixed with glass,/ ground to powder."

While the poet has written these poems as an information conveyed to a visiting friend, these poems are seeped in the myths behind the names of the waterfalls in Cherra. These myths, recalled in the non- native English language, describe native intelligence and their skillful management of their foe. In the re-telling of the myths, there is a sense of re- identification with the past and the proud sense of recovery is injected in the mode of re-telling. To Nongkynrih, myths and legends are not just stories that are retold time after time but they contain in them different images that are instructive to "those, who will, draw lessons from them." The poet himself asks a question while at the Likai Falls, wondering if he should ever "marry/ a woman with a child" (p.31) which signifies that myths have instructive appeal even in the present generation.

In his Introduction to *Earth Songs,* a collection of short-stories from the Northeast, K.C Baral has mentioned a unique phenomenon that the writers in the Northeast have; which is the close proximity to their fabled land (x). Indeed, although modernity has brought about changes in their ways of life and amenities, the people of the Northeast still enjoy a vast degree of closeness to nature. Moreover, due to the absence of the written-word, many of the tribes in the Northeast rely on nature to mark territories or boundaries that remain undisputed even though their significance have been passed down by word of the mouth. This is echoed in several works of the poets. While at Cherra narrating the myths, Nongkynrih tells his listener:

Here is the story

that haunts the place,
here are the rocks
that carry still
vague imprints of the beast
and articles of the feast" (p. 25).

Likewise, Dai has also spoken of the significance of markings to her community, saying

Here we have marked the land
with upright branches and stones
and consecrated territory
with song. (p. 42)

The degree of proximity that the people of the Northeast have with nature has been amply reflected in their poems. In the assertion of their identity, it is only natural for the poets that they turn to nature wherein are located many signifiers of their identity. As KC Baral has noted, the landscape of the Northeast is "both ancient as well as modern" that has its existence from the time of the legends to the present (ix). In the poets' connection with their natural world is where they display the source of their creativity; and their reclamation of intellectual space by revisiting mythical places and territories signify what Baral calls "a seeking of some kind of wholeness in the face of disintegration and fragmentation" (xi).

Identity, as propounded by Bhabha, in today's world is no longer fixed but essentially hybrid. Emphasizing the "failure of colonial regimes to produce stable and fixed regimes," Bhabha believes that "hybridity of identities and ambivalence of colonial discourse" describes colonial encounter more adequately (Loomba 92).

Accordingly, poems written by the poets of the Northeast reflect a hybridized and complex identity that has been formed by colonial contacts yet has maintained its rootedness.

In assessing the relation between the colonizers and colonized in the Northeast, Harekrishna Deka concludes that although initially "enamoured" by Western culture and thought, "the native culture was strong enough to escape being wholly submerged by the western culture" (4). As Loomba has mentioned, the idea of binary oppositions between the colonizers and colonized is questionable if one takes into account the "enormous cultural and racial differences within each of these categories as well as cross-overs between them" (91). Stereotyping in colonial discourse put aside, the fact that the culture of the colonizers was also compromised upon in its contact with native culture must not be ignored. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha has written that the "liminal problem of colonial identity and its vissitudes emerges" due to the problem of "in-between-ness" in the creation of colonial otherness (64). Bhabha goes on to define the fluidity of identity in that it can never be fixed as it is "always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image."

Assimilation being a colonial project to "absorb the subaltern subjects into the culture of the colonizing power" (Thieme 20), there is no doubt that an internal war waged between two opposing cultures in their contact with each other. The degree to which colonialism in India has succeeded in assimilating native culture can be measured by the nationalist movement that began under the leadership of Gandhi. Loomba has discussed how great leaders like Gandhi and Nehru had, in their course of assimilation, appropriated not only the colonizer's language but also ideas and philosophies in their role in the fight for independence from the British (163). Like

them, in Bengal, many intellectuals who had received Western education appropriated and began to produce many works not only for reading but also for stage performances "an aesthetic sphere that would be distinctly Indian" (Loomba 162).

The same took place among the people of the Northeast. Despite being exposed to colonial education and thought, the colonizer's culture could not penetrate deep into the minds of the natives. Despite the fact that material culture displays an "overarching influence of modernity," it cannot be denied that "exclusionary tribal identities remain strong" among the people of the Northeast (Das 6). According to Zokaitluangi, the contact with the colonial world brought about an "acculturative stress," which is a "mutual influence of two autonomous cultural systems" wherein the dominant eventually subvert the subordinate (78). Zokaitluangi lists out *four policies of acculturation* as below:

1. Separation: This phenomenon takes place when the subordinate culture maintains its distance from the host or dominant culture
2. Assimilation: Assimilation occurs when the subordinate culture loses its identity by adopting the culture of the dominant society
3. Integration: The subordinate group maintains its cultural identity while adapting to the culture of the dominant society
4. Marginalization: This phenomenon takes place when the subordinate society "loses its original cultural identity while avoiding the dominant culture and showing no interest in the larger society" (80-81).

In the process of acculturation between the colonizers and the colonized in the Northeast, it is evident that there were several levels of acculturation that took place. These forms of acculturation may differ from culture to culture; but the most striking acculturation that took place is seen in material culture and practices as the British

administrators, by virtue of their position as rulers, imposed bans on several practices. In such situation, an individual becomes poised to acculturate according to the mainstream as part of his survival instinct (Zokaitluangi 88).

A closer look at the poems written by selected poets of the Northeast reveals the impact of this acculturation in the intellectual level. In the poem "An Obscure Place" (2009), Dai writes of the fate of her people following their contact with the colonial world, stating that "the words of strangers have led us/ into a mist deeper than the ones we left behind" (27-28). This poem is essentially a brief yet concise account of the history of her people where the poet juxtaposes the orality of her people with the colonizers' written word. Placing the centrality of oral tradition in her culture, she begins the poem saying that the history of the Adi people began with "the place of stories" (2). While admitting that "nothing is certain" (5) regarding their history, she ends the poem stating that there is more confusion now due to "the words of strangers."

To Ao, the biggest factor that has brought about change in her culture, as seen in her poem "Blood of Others" was the advent of "a tribe of strangers" who were entered into their territory with nothing but the Bible and the gospel that promised eternal life (13-16). In this poem, Ao talks about the contact between her people and the British, revealing the extent to which acculturation was imposed on them by the British administrators and the missionaries (17-28). There is an ironic perception of a religion of acculturation . Eventually, the people became "perfect mimics" of the colonizers who eventually

borrowed their minds

Aped their manners,

Adopted their gods" (45-48).

Dai's portrayal of the identity of her people following the advent of Christianity in the above quoted lines signify the lack of depth in the identity formation of the people who dispossessed an outward show of Westernization. The terms such as "borrowed," "aped" and "adopted" are indicators of the spatial in-betweenness of the people whose attempt at adapting to the new identity ensued by their contact with colonial world was not freed of skepticism and doubts. Ao's choices of the terms are conscious projection of the margins left in the adaptation of a new identity by the people which was affected to a great degree.

Like Dai, Ao also talks about the confusion that ensued when two cultures came into contact with each other. She writes that they "listened in confusion/ To the new stories" (21-22) but eventually became assimilated as they "allowed our knowledge of other days/ To be trivialized into taboo" (23-24). Linguistically, Ao's usage of the term "tribe" in introducing the white men can be seen as a deliberate attempt to juxtapose the two cultures that were coming into contact with. The term being loaded with multiple policies of identity, in calling the white men "tribes," Ao subtly expresses the sense of civilization of her own tribe against the newcomers.

Meanwhile, Kharmawphlang attributes the process of acculturation of his society not just to colonialism. In the poem "The Conquest" (2009), the poet lists out three different phases that his tribe came into contact with:

1. The intermarriage between Khasi men with women of Surma prior colonialism
2. British colonialism and Christianity
3. Advent of plains-people

To Nongkynrih, the true identity of a Khasi is difficult to place in the present. He writes of the dilemma faced by a Khasi when it comes to identifying his roots because of the amount of acculturative stress he had gone through. Thus, in the poem "Identification Marks" (2011), the poet gives a "strange answer" to "a strange question" on the problems associated with identification of a Khasi man. He says that a Khasi man cannot be identified by his mother tongue nor by his physical features because of his mixed heritage (5-8). His dress is "truly universal" (10) and he is not religious; he cannot be identified by his reverence for traditional rulers or political leaders since he has become disillusioned by them (9-21). Therefore, the poet answers to the question on how does one spot a Khasi, saying:

> 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. (22-32)

Nongkynrih's description of the modern Khasi man is reflective of an individual who still has connections to his cultural roots and performs according to the demands of traditional practices. However, the reiteration of "once a year" is an

important signifier of the loss of traditional bearings of a hybridized individual who despite his awareness of each cultural signifiers of his community, performs accordingly only once a year. Moreover, this revelation puts the speaker of his existence as one living an ever shifting in-between ness.

Ngangom displays an awareness of his hybrid identity in a poem titled "Values" (1988) where he defends his profession against comparison with paychecks of government officials by asserting his myriad skills that are beyond measure in financial terms. In a sarcastic manner, Ngangom tries to assert his multi-talents by showcasing skills that he is good at; cooking being one among them, saying

> I have acquired…
>
> a cooking skill on my own
>
> I can make mint juleps, chow mein
>
> and kheer (28-31)

Here, the poet brings in the names of delicacies from various cultures in order to prove his multi-talents and his knowledge that has transcended across borders. Moreover, by claiming that he is skilled in preparing these delicacies also indirectly reflect the hybrid food-culture of the poet. Thus the conglomeration of these varied delicacies attests to the amount of hybridization that he has gone through in his life.

Aware of the hybridization that each of their culture has gone through, the poets have shown that shifts in their identity was indispensable because of the situation they were pushed into by outside forces. In their Introduction to *Dancing*

Earth, Nongkynrih and Ngangom refute that the "recurrent appearance of myth and tribal folklore" in the poems written by poets of the Northeast is "Romantic escapism" but is, instead, the poets' desire "to interpret the mythic past" and use them as "high culture" (xiii). Ao has also disclaimed that revisiting the past through their poetry "does not seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature" elsewhere (Misra xviii). To Ao, the growth of the poets' sensibilities towards the manner in which they had perceived their own oral tradition and their realization of its importance had let them delve into their past. Ao's statement on the growth of the poets' sensibilities towards the way they perceive the elements of their orality is true in the case of poets like Nongkynrih and Ngangom, including Ao herself. Basing the argument on the first publication of their poetry to the more recent ones, the poets have all produced works that have consistently shown their growth towards their heritage in that their latter works encapsulate their myths and folktales more.

As Deka has commented, the native culture of the Northeast could not be wholly assimilated by colonial culture (5). This is primarily due to the fact that there has always been a strong rootedness to one's cultural identity among the people of the Northeast. Therefore, even when they came into contact with the colonizers, the people of the Northeast, without being separated from the culture of the colonizers, integrated and appropriated the culture of the colonizers instead. However, this process did not happen overnight; as Ao has mentioned in her poem "Blood of Others," it took "a mere century of negation" (53) for the native culture to emerge stronger in the century-old acculturate stress between the colonizers and the colonized in the Northeast. Factors leading to this stage may be varied and many; and the wake of post colonialism among the previously colonized nations might be one of the most fundamental factors towards this fate. Yet, judging by the poetical works of the

poets, the change is apparent; evidenced by the use of myths and elements of orality in the poetic works of select poets of the region.

However, this does not imply that the poets have succeeded in creating a new nation that is completely freed of the varied mechanisms of colonialism. Even during the process of assimilation, one must take into consideration what Said had said in *Culture & Imperialism* about the liability of culture to amass changes, stating that "cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude" (15).

In such case, poetical works produced by select poets of the region must bear traces of foreign influence. True, in many of their works, there are reflections of the influences of Western culture and thought; as in Ao using the concept of "*tabula rasa*" which is essentially a philosophical term borrowed from Latin in the poem "Blood of Others" (2011). In some of her earlier works, many of Ao's poems deal with Biblical characters such as Salome, Joseph or the serpent in the garden (1988). Likewise, in Nongkynrih's earlier poems, there are allusions to Eve of the Bible and Hardy's Tess to evoke the image of temptation (1992). However, these images and allusions to outside influences eventually become overshadowed by the rich oral tradition where the poets "related these to their poetic vision, philosophy and craft" (Guha). From Eve and Tess, Nongkynrih draws allusions from Likai or Sngi Thiang to ponder about his modern perplexities. Likewise, Ao's allusions have also shifted from the conventional Western forms to those closer to her home.

In their switch from the influences of the outside to their myths and folktales, the poets display an ease in their transition, as seen through their poetical career throughout the years; incorporating elements from their traditions without any

affectation. Nongkynrih's mention of the Khasi traditional belief of the afterlife may be cited as an example of how natural this switch takes place in the sensibilities of the poets:

> My uncle, who's gone to take
>
> betel nut in the abode of God,
>
> used to take me there. (A Day in Cherrapunjee: III; 15-17)

In one of his latter poems, Nongkynrih has also employed the allusion of the Khasi folk character called Ren, a fisherman who had fallen in love with a nymph. In this poem, the poet draws a connection between the fisherman who had followed his beloved, leaving his message to his mother but which remained unheard by her because of the distance between them (2011: 18-19). According to Mark Bender, the images inferred from this poem convey "the mindless absorption of outside forces of acculturation by the Khasi" (119).

As noted by Guha, the poets are "propelled by their own poetic conscience and genius, intuitively feeling the urge to write what has already been termed as 'ethnic' poetry" (120). Thus, all the makings of ethnicity have been an inherent quality among the different poets due to their culturally-linked intuition which has enabled them to produced poetical works that are effortlessly rooted to their culture and identity. And in the manner with which these poets employed the medium of writing, Baishali Baruah feels like "English is implicated and used for subversive intent" by the poets (4), as echoed by Dai when, in the poem "I will Never Forget" (2004), she talks of writing as a "craft", saying that her "words craft/ a way to explain/ parables of destiny" (18-20). Because of the ideological nature of language,

Baruah sees in the poets' employment of English as a medium for writing an "embedding" of "identity politics." Dai has mentioned that myths and legends are means of identification through which the people "recognize each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community" (5). Perhaps it is this exclusivity of identity the poems display that gives them the sense of identity politics. This identity is both the identity of the community as a whole and the identity of the individual as the poets have displayed their individual reactions or interpretations of the myths.

Indeed, intrinsic to the psychological make-up of the people of the Northeast is their identity. Though varying from tribe to tribe, it is undeniable that there are identity markers across the communities in Northeast that set one apart from the other. Despite the homogenization of the various tribes of the Naga, "each tribe with its distinct language, social customs and dress codes has continued to live as an identifiable ethnic entity" (Ao *The Ao-Naga…*6) in and around present day Nagaland. According to Ao, the Naga identity is a three-layered structure contained in their existential, locational and artefactual identity which is still practiced in the modern society till date. Among the Ao-Naga, myths still play its active part in their day to day lives as knowledge derived from them are still practiced: especially in terms of marriage where exogamy is still practiced. According to the origin myth of the Ao-Naga, out of the Lungterok stone, six persons: three men and three women, emerged and married with other clans. It is in keeping with this tradition that the Ao-Nagas still practice exogamy. Moreover, like most tribal communities, an Ao-Naga identifies himself with his affiliation to his locality, the absence of which is no greater a humiliation for him. Lastly, the identity of a particular clan is signified by artifacts that are important symbols of identity. These artifacts may range from tattoos to

shawls and to designs in houses; yet each of these artifacts are important markers of identity.

It is therefore no wonder that much of Ao's poems are infused with elements from her oral tradition for they are still living and are being practiced till today. In "Soul-bird" (2009), the poet brings in elements of their beliefs in the afterlife as she speaks of her mother's funeral. As the people who have gathered to witness the performance of the last rites chant prayers, the poet looks up and sees "a lonely hawk/ Soaring/ Amidst the swirling blue" (2-3) of the sky. The sight of the hawk immediately causes the poet to remember the traditional beliefs of her people that the soul of a person changes into birds, insects or even caterpillars (Nongkynrih & Ngangom *Dancing Earth* 5). Ao ends the poem with how this belief is handed down orally among her people through the mourning grandmother and child; seeing the hawk, the grandmother tells the poet to look at the bird as it is her mother's soul "saying her final goodbye" (32).

Identity then, being interchangeable and malleable to outside forces, still places the ethnic identity of people of the Northeast to the possibility of change with time. Although the present identity of different communities have undergone major transitions following colonialism and have reached at the formulation of an identity which is essentially the product of the acculturate stress; of an identity that is hybridized by centuries of cultures interacting with one another, this identity may go through transition again because identity cannot be fixed for all times and in unchanging stabilities.

One determining factor that differentiates a Northeasterner from the others is his relation with identity. Unlike other cultures that had gone through several years

or century of formulation of its identity, the different communities in the Northeast were exposed to several changes within a comparatively short period of time. It is mainly due to this reason that there is a crisis in identity in the region, even though identity is not fixed, because it was still in its early stage of formulation.

On identification, Bhabha (1994) states that it is not "the affirmation of a pre-given identity" or a "self-fulfilling prophecy" but is "always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (64). With the present society being exposed to various developments along with the rest of the world, where there is an increasing "economic 'integration' through commerce and trade" (Rajkumar 54), there is fear among the older generations that the globalized market would "commodif[y]" tribal cultures which would ensue in tribal communities becoming "mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people" (Ao 2006; 7). In his essay "Globalization and Local Cultures: The Tribes of North East India" (2006), Anil Boro brings out what Lehmann terms as "two-fold ways" in which globalization interacts with culture, viz., i) homogenization and ii) cosmopolitanism.

In the growing importance of globalization especially through economic enterprise, there is fear among tribal communities that their cultural signifiers would be at stake due to economic assimilation. It is due to this that the assertion of one's identity becomes more relevant as it upholds one's roots while at the same time "decoloni[zing] the native mind from collaborating with neocolonial mechanisms of power." These neo-colonial mechanisms of power such as capitalism, globalization and economic liberalization are seen as forces that have gradually eroded tribal ways of life and tribal ways of thinking. Anil Boro, himself a bi-lingual poet in Northeast

India gives his response to globalization that it is perceived by many as "a new form of encroachment on the local or regional territories" (13). Yet those who favor globalization cite its facilitation of networks across the world for global market, bringing about "an ecologically responsible attitude to the management of the earth's resources" and better connectivity through the Internet (Thieme 107-108). Despite these reasons, many see globalization as an extension of colonialism as its interest is vested with capitalism as well. Kharmawphlang defines what globalization is, saying that "it is about the exploitation of the market on a global scale" (2006, 12). Apart from this, globalization is seen as a potential threat to marginalized communities across the world not only in terms of its homogenization but also in its capability to "exploit labour sources and markets" for the benefits of the developing countries (Thieme 107).

Closer home, there is a feeling that with the extent of challenges that culture and identity that the people of the Northeast has faced, large-scale globalization could "erase" the "unique identities" of the people living in the region (Boro 14). To this perception of globalization, the select poets of the region have reacted through their poems to reveal what they feel are corroding in their culture or community due to globalization and express why identity and cultural signifiers must be asserted. In the poem "Identification Marks" (2011), Nongkynrih laments on the hybridized identity of a Khasi man who has very little of his cultural markers left in him. The poet mentions that the Khasi has lost all his intrinsic identities except for one day when during *Weiking* or *Pomblang*, a festival observed in spring and winter, he wears his traditional attire and speaks of his heritage. The poet reiterates that this takes place only "once a year" which exposes the perils faced by the markers of intrinsic identity in the contemporary age:

A Khasi is a man

…

Who once a year, says

"to Know Man- to Know God"

…

But this, only once a year. (22-32)

Ao most eloquently expresses her feelings against globalization which she feels has threatened her culture by its commodification of identity markers. There is a fear of loss as she feels that "mutations of cultural artifacts" will eventually lead to the tribes' anonymity (Ao 7). In the poem "Heritage" (2010), Ao talks about seeing artifacts from her tribe being displayed at a museum in a foreign country which prompted her to wonder if "they would respond" if she spoke to them in her native language. She then goes on to speak of what she feels about removing artifacts from their places of origin, stating that "artifacts wrenched from their origin/ Must, by reason, remain mute" (2010). In the poem, the poet is inspired to think of the effects of being uprooted from one's indigenous place as the sense of loss that is ensued is lamentable.

Ao expresses the same thought in the poem "Prayer of a Monolith" (2011). In the poem, the poet personifies a monolith that has been removed from its original place in the deep forest. The poem reflects on the changes that have taken place in the natural order of things caused by man on the pretext of progress. Having been removed from its natural location, the monolith was "planted" "as their new-found trophy" (31) at the village gate. Despite being reveled at by the villagers, the monolith states that he is no longer the "proud and content" monolith that he had been in the forest with his "beloved of the laughing dimple/ Standing by [his] side"

(4-5). The poem brings out the inhumanity of mankind in its treatment of natural things around him and the degree of disconnect between the modern man and nature:

> They dislodges me from my moorings
>
> They tore me from her side
>
> They chipped and chiseled
>
> They gave me altered proportions. (25-28)

There is a poignant air of sadness and dejection as the monolith speaks of his anonymity "as [he] stood in [his] shame/ For someone else's fame" (43-44).

In the essay "Globalization and Local Cultures," Anil Boro gives two significant phenomena that take place in globalization, saying that it "either eliminates local elements or incorporates them without acknowledging it" or "it may incorporate and celebrate local elements" (14). However, Ao is skeptical of the influences of globalization on local culture as she is critically aware of its mutation. Referring to the traditional shawl worn by the Ao-Naga, the "mangkotepsu," which is traditionally a male attire but which has been commoditized to suit global market by converting it into jackets, Ao states that the traditional male attire "have become unisexual and are sold at tourist spots with its lore and history totally ignored" (6-7). This mutation of traditional attires have not only "muted" the attires of their intrinsic relation to their culture but display how globalization has "eliminate[d] local elements" by its blatant ignorance of the cultural heritage of tribal communities. Yet this is an inevitable situation that is bound to occur in a globalized world since "cultural assets and products are bound to be pushed for large-scale commodification and loss of their unique identities" (Boro 15).

One of the main reasons why globalization is considered to be a threat to ethnic identity and culture especially in the Northeast is its direct influence on individual and artifactual identity wherein "the identities embodied in cultural products will thus be eliminated for greater marketability" (Ao *Ao- Naga Oral…* 7). Despite the significance of identity among the tribes of the Northeast, it has been exposed to severe acculturate stress and has been placed at a vulnerable state for over a century. Ongoing formulations of ethnic identity and its recovery from colonial discourses have been destabilized to a certain degree by ethnic violence within the region. In "Blood of Others" (2011), Ao narrates the painful process of recovering one's identity, facilitated by the realization of "treason against the essential self" (60). This ensues in the birth of "a new breed of cultural heroes" who act towards

> demanding reinstatement
>
> Of customary identity
>
> And restoration of ancestral ground
>
> As a belligerent postscript to recent history. (65-68)

This reclamation has not been without its struggles, as the poet continues with disturbing images of the fight for independence:

> In the agony of the re-birth
> Our hills and valleys reverberate
> With death- dealing shrieks of unfamiliar arms
> As the throwback generation resurrects.

Because of the duration and angst with which the modern identity of the people of the Northeast has been formulated, another change is not greeted with

much enthusiasm. Nongkynrih, in "Only Strange Flowers Have Come to Bloom," (2011) compares the loss of identity and its eventual reclamation by his people with that of pear trees:

> Like them we shed our old ways
> and having shed them we find
> no spring to bring the flowers back. (10-12)

In drawing a comparison between his people and pear trees, the poet differentiates the two by claiming that unlike pear trees that follow the natural course of seasons, mankind cannot revert back and forth the natural order of things. While the trees may shed their leaves so that new leaves could grow forth, it is not the case with one's identity; its loss cannot be recovered by the passing of time. To imply the irreconcilability of such things, the poet goes on to ask a rhetorical question, thus: "How long can we go on/ living like wind-blown thistle downs?" (13-14)

Kharmawphlang's "Poems during November" (2011) that begins with an account of his visit to Dain Thlen ends with a sense of continuity in the natural course of things, like the rain that still "weep on these hills" (p.61). This sense of continuity is disrupted by an epiphany that nags his mind:

> This is a strange trip, taking us
> To track down private wars waged
> In the territories of mind.

In the lines that follow, Kharmawphlang goes on to imply that the continuance in natural course of time signified by the "changeless smell" has been disrupted by

"the visit of religion" which has compounded the traditional way of life causing "recorded centuries of an empire" to rest "mutely in graves and monuments" (61).

According to Foucault, "power is everywhere" and there are structures of power in every discourse. Foucault has theorized that "power is a system" that includes in its working the whole structure of the society. Having stated that "power is everywhere" and that it "comes from everywhere," Foucault stressed on the pervasive force of power by dismantling possible conception of power as coercive and individualistic. Power is not concentrated to a particular individual or group of people and does not possess a centre. Poets of the region have reflected this pervasive force of power by talking about various power systems within their society. While Nongkynrih feels the weight of matriarchy in his poems, Ngangom talks about the stifling army rule in his homeland. Apart from these, the poets also voice out against the indispensable power structure in their respective societies which reflects the shortcomings of their society. Ao makes a lamentation on the indispensability of power that corrupts the innocence of children in her poem "Children of Man" (1992). In the poem, Ao talks about the loss of innocence of the children from disposing "laughter without diplomacy,/ And words without duplicity" (22-23) to becoming "unrecognizable as such/ because they grow like us" (25-26).

In Kharmawphlang's "Letter to Pahambir" (2011), there are instances of similar productive resistance to the increasingly Westernized Khasi society. The poet's journey away from the city to a village to meet its chief is significant because by escaping from the discipline of discourse of the city, he is free to find traces of his indigenous self from the village chief. In his resistance of the dominant discourse of the city he is living in, Kharmawphlang rediscovers his roots from the chief in a

village. Similarly, in his volume of poems collected in *Moments* (1988), Nongkynrih finds transquility in his poetic self as he returns to his ancestral village Sohra. Awed by the changes that have taken place during his absence, the poet nevertheless sees sights and places that were part of his youthful memories.

Mark Bender sees in poetical works of the Northeast and China reflections of "similar concerns over situations of rapid cultural shifting as local folk cultures are impacted by influences from urban, consumer-based cultures, various political and religious agendas, and the forces of that nebulous term 'globalization'" (106). He states that "attention to lore and experience is an important element in developing approaches to these literatures born both of change and tradition" (Ibid). Dai feels that myths and legends in the poems written by the poets of the region and the intensity with which they are used are acts of "a reaffirmation of belief, expressions of hope and metamorphosis" (2012).

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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Poetic resistance emerging from Northeast India, as this study attempts to explore, is found to be multifaceted in literary sensibility. This resistance is not a new phenomenon in the Northeast, since its early expressions are available in modern vernacular literatures prior to modern English poetry. The poetic voices of resistance and difference is characteristically motivated by love of rootedness and identity issues. Resistance can be of different forms; and though political and social forms of resistance are more powerful and effective, poetic resistance is more subtle, wider and have a more humane appeal and is equally important. This is because poetic resistance goes beyond history and into the oral traditions without confining itself to political issues and does not seek for immediate answers. It does not merely resist against the mainstream and other forms of power structure but claims the pre-historic identity since resistance to mainstream and identity give impetus to look into ethnicity. Despite being exposed to colonial education and thought, the colonizer's culture could not penetrate deep into the minds of the natives. Although material culture displays an "overarching influence of modernity" following the intervention of colonialism, it cannot be denied that "exclusionary tribal identities remain strong" among the people of the Northeast (Das 6).

The interest in different genres of literature that have emerged from the Northeast has garnered many opinions and criticisms over the years. Having been hailed as "a new form of Indian writing in English" (Guha *Northeast Poetry…*), poetry written in English by poets from different communities of the Northeast have been critically assessed and analyzed by critics and scholars over the past few years.

Acknowledging the prejudices that the Northeast has been subjected to, Keki N. Daruwalla says, in his review of poetry written by poets of the Northeast: "that there is some very fine poetry also being written here would astonish most." Baishali Baruah has noted that the poems "elude simple interpretation" because poets of the Northeast have implicated "their specific cultural contexts" (3) in their poetical works, which is a crucial feature of postcolonial writing. Poets of the Northeast, like other postcolonial writers, have displayed their creation of "a new discourse" (Ashcroft 184) by dismantling the "notion of a standard 'code'…by the continuum of practice in which the language is formed." This they have been able to achieve by showing their distinct individuality in their appropriation of the colonizers' language and assimilating it in such a manner that their respective cultures and ethnicities have been strongly infused in their works. Example may be made of Dai's infusion of local elements in many of her poems, such as those images of the "river's voice" (24) or "cloud woman" (31) seen in "The Missing Link," or the expression of pertinent landslides in the hills during the rainy season by a line in the poem "Jingles," saying that "the hills will fall down" (32).

In her essay, "Language, Orality and Literature," (1996) while discussing about Mulk Raj Anand's usage of Indian locutions and Raja Rao's employment of the Sanskrit rhythms of storytelling tradition, Chantal Zabus says that when "'the Empire writes back to the centre,' it does so not so much with a vengeance as 'with an accent'" by "inscribing post-colonial language variants from the 'margin' or 'the periphery' in the text" (34). The observation that Zabus has made on the works of the two Indian writers are applicable to the poets of the Northeast in their infusion of their tribal "accents" into their works; as seen in Ao's "Blood of Others" (2011) where the elements of orality are explored and employed by Ao, or in Dai's "Tapu"

(2004) where the poet expresses in poetic terms the symbols behind the traditional dance of the Adi tribe. In this way, the poetical works, being "post-colonial or new literatures" have displayed what Griffiths had called "the result of fusions" (169).

The idea of "ethnicity" and "identity" today are highly loaded terms especially in an age when the boundaries of identity and ethnicity are increasingly breached due to worldwide commodification and globalization. In an age of hybridization of cultures, no singular culture can remain in isolation for, in the words of Bruce King, "cultures change, have always changed and have been influenced by other cultures" (22). Likewise, the quest for pure ethnic identity amidst acculturation of two cultures in the present is bound to failure for there can no longer be "pure" identity in terms of being untouched and unchanged by outside forces. Therefore there is a sense of loss in the poets' quest for their ethnic identities through revisiting their past that have been stored in their myths and legends and informed through their oral traditions such as folktales and songs. This is because the present hybridized culture can no longer rely on the validity of the past since it has gone through "mutation." Dai's poem "Gone" (2010) talks about the unending cycle of change that is inevitable. Beginning the poem describing how her people "have long journeys in our blood" (1), she goes on saying that "the road has no end" (2). However, faced with the present reality of several degrees of mutations that her culture has gone through, Dai laments:

What is felt

Left unsaid

Is a sadness.

Bereft of our symbols

This strange tattoo in my heart

Is the sound of footsteps. (22-27)

In order to retrieve her ethnic past, Dai can no longer rely on their cultural signifiers for they have gone through mutations and have, to a certain degree, lost their significance. Thus, it becomes imperative for her to rely on racial memory and through memories etched on nature around her, as expressed in "The Missing Link" (2004):

Where else could we be born

Where else could we belong

If not of memory

Divining life and form out of silence. (25-28)

Yet the poet is acutely aware of the limitations of memory, and reminds herself so:

And memory is a changing shape

Showing with these fading possessions

In lands beyond the great ocean

That all is changed but not ended. (35-38)

Despite the challenge faced by the poet in negotiating with the process of loss and recovery, Dai continues to believe in the validity of memory, as she says in "Remembrance" (2004) :

Why did we think ritual gods would survive

Deathless in memory,

In trees and stones and the sleep of babies;

Now, when we close our eyes

And cease to believe, god dies. (17-21)

Through these lines, Dai asserts that the process of recovery can be complete only when there is faith in the reality of memory for disbelief, or the rejection of its validity causes the death of these signifiers. Dai's stress on the importance of remembrance is invocative of the Adi's prevalence of spoken over written word prior to British administration. In privileging memory over the written, there is a subtle resistance to Western privilege of the written word. This is where the poet has claimed difference from Western conception of written word through her poetry.

In his analysis of Mizo poetry written in English, Sarangadhar Baral states that the common "Christianised culture" of the Northeast did not transcribe the "ethnic tradition" of the people during the initial stages of Western education whereas many works of the Christian tradition such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* were made available for the people to read in vernacular languages. This has subjected the people of the Northeast to another form of epistemic violence where, to quote S. Baral, "this written literature was planted to serve as the *only* (italics as in the original text) historical evidence of a literature of an oral race to cite, refer to, and sing, by renewable energy of recovery, in all futures" (16). Although the missionaries are not agents of British imperialism (16), their idea of provision of Western education pushed the existing tradition of native education through orality to the sidelines to the extremity of oblivion whereby it has become necessary to revisit and reinvoke them in the contemporary times.

The process of loss and recovery of the past is a different experience of the poet Ngangom who is uprooted from his native land, Manipur. To him, the act of recovery is more an individual attempt at reconnecting with his birthplace that had been through much violence and bloodshed. In this sense, Ngangom dispossesses the condition of the diaspora, where he deals with the estrangement of his memory with

that of the present reality. His earlier poem "A Country" (1988) talks about remorse at having left his native land:

> Somewhere in the archives of memory
> Which yields only regret
> Abandoning that troubled native valley
> I crossed nine ranges
> To drift along this country's
> Ambiguous mainstream. (5-10)

However, as the poet has mentioned through the above lines, his feeling of guilt has been pushed to the back of his memory for they tended to "yield only regret" (6). However, the latter poems of Ngangom reveal that the poet cannot leave the memory of his native land, or his love for Manipur as he feels her presence in him, stating in "Everywhere I go…" (2006) thus: "Everywhere I go/ I carry my homeland with me" (1-2). The poem reveals the poet's attempt to reconcile with his native land which is a painful exercise for him because in his patriotic zeal of self-exile from the native-land he had abandoned, the poet is faced with the apathy of the people living in Manipur to the horrors caused by rampant violence in his land, saying: "Whenever I touch my homeland's streets/ everyone seems happy and have no grouses" (33-34). The poet's description of how the condition of violence that his native land has plagued his mind endlessly is met with a surprising attitude of nonchalance of the natives. Although baffled by the attitude of the natives, the poet assures himself not to give up from doing what he can for his land:

> I must stop agonizing or save what I can
> Such as the tunes of my homeland
> Which dance in my blood. (35-37)

Through the activity of poetry writing, poets of the Northeast have assumed the role of chroniclers and attempt at the recovery of their ethnic past from obscurity. In the poem "The Old Story Teller" (2011), Ao talks about the importance of recovering one's past and its retelling, stating that

> …each telling revitalized
> My life force
> And each story reinforced
> My racial reminiscence. (11-14)

This is why Ao has, as conveyed in her poem, began to take up the role of storytelling which she had always believed was her "proud legacy" (1). Within the poem, Ao tells why recovery of the past through the act of storytelling is essential for marginalized communities:

> So I told stories
> As my racial responsibility
> To instill in the young
> The art of perpetuating
> Existential history and essential tradition
> To be passed on to the next generation. (33-38)

Ao's avowal of the "racial responsibility" of being a storyteller does not only imply the act of transmitting knowledge of stories to the younger generation. She states that her racial responsibility also includes educating the youths of the importance of deconstructing historiography and keeping one's tradition alive so that their significance will not be lost. To Dai, the act of writing is not a voluntary act of exercise but is an act of asserting what is inherent to her in the poem "And I

See the Land" (2004). Through the poem, Dai describes the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh as she looks around her. She sees the majestic beauty of her land where nature is at work according to different seasons without fail. The poet then says that the words that she writes are not new, for she has repeated from sources that had already existed in the nature around her:

> and I know every word I write
> is a repetition,
> a technique in concealment (15- 17)

Dai's statement of writing as a "technique in concealment" signifies that the act of writing to her, is putting into words the things that have not been put into writing and hence preserve racial memory, or of the beauty of her land, through writing. The poet dispossesses an air of acclamation as she speaks of her land that has embraced a new identity:

> And I see you in your new bravery
> Saluting fate,
> In the silence of a new script
> Breaking the uncertain day. (20-23)

She has also reflected her career as a journalist in the poem "Saturn" (2004) where the poet expresses the dismay of being able to write eloquently:

> I write for consolation,
> For news to reach me like a new discovery.
> No, we did not want to fool ourselves,
> To configure destiny;
> But still my heart breaks in such regret

For the failure of words. (12-17)

In her assessment of Mamang Dai's poetical works, Arundhathi Subramaniam writes that "for all its simplicity, Dai's poetry does not arrive at easy conclusions" (2). This is because there is "a deep unease about erased histories and an uncertain future" that comes across her poetry. This is an obvious tendency for the poet has said in the poem "I Will Never Forget" (2004) "my words craft/ a way to explain/ parables of destiny" (18-20). One of Dai's preoccupations as seen through her poetry is justly this negotiation with loss and recovery, seen in the poem "The Balm of Time" (2004) where the poet sees the past living in the people she meets, saying

I know, from faces that I meet,
In these lives that have crumbled,
That the past lives in these eyes
That the jungle shows, sometimes. (5-8)

Keen on the preservation of her ethnic roots through her poems, there are instances where the poet senses the wide divide between the past and future as she distinguishes the children and the aged in her community, speaking about how "dreaming in treetops children hear voices" (9) in "The Balm of Time" (2004) and of how "in the courtyards the old men sit/ like stone, remembering" (27- 28) in "Even in This Season of Chrysanthemums" (2004). The poet reveals, in "Love Song of the Warrior" (2004), the awareness of her part in negotiating with the past and future generations of her people in order to keep the racial memory alive, saying thus:

In the stream of my blood memory hums
Softly, telling me,
Near death and the broken summer

As long as I remember

We live. (31-35)

Nongkynrih has also asserted the role of the poet in his essay "The Writer and The Community" (2006) where he states that as a poet, there are objectives that he has set for himself:

> I would like to tell them of the colossal threat posed to our land by the ceaseless flood of humanity and the growing aggressiveness of migrants. I would like to speak to them of the perils of terrorism and the greater peril of lawmen turning terrorists. I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity.

True to his conviction of his part as a poet who not only chronicles the events of his times, Nongkynrih has spoken about many issues people living in Meghalaya face thus assuming the role of an instructor in several of his poems. Meghalaya shares its border with Bangladesh and one of the problems that it faces is the illegal migration of Bangladeshis. In 2013, it was reported by the Online Edition of *The Telegraph* that 18951 illegal migrants from Bangladesh were detected within the span of five years. According to the article "Meghalaya faces rise in immigrants - 18951 Bangladeshis detected in 5 years," various groups demanded regulation of Inner Line Permit but the Centre "had sanctioned the construction of border roads and fencing in two phases" and refused the regulation of ILP. Nongkynrih has dealt with the issue of migration and influxes of outsiders into Meghalaya since the beginning of his poetical career. In one of his earlier poems "Shillong" (1992), Nongkynrih has mentioned the growth of migrants in the capital of the city

where the floods of humanity

Eat into its very base, day by day,

Like hordes of ants at honeyed bread. (5-7)

As if in a trance, the poet, standing alone, feels tremors in his heart and hears "a voice from the withering tribes faraway" (9), whispering that

There's no preserving deity

No wondrous walls for palisades

No passé-partout for escape routes. (11-13)

In their study titled "Towards a Poetics of Reconstruction: Reading and Enacting Identity in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's Poetry," Subashish Bhattacharjee and Saikat Guha have stated that one of the issues faced by a Northeasterner is "identity crisis" resulting in "the clash between the myriad ethnic groups, some of which call themselves 'native' and label others as 'immigrant'" (83) which has given rise to "the palimpsest of multi-layered conflict." Nongkynrih has asserted in his poem "The Influx" (2011) that if unchecked, the problem of immigration will lead to grave problems:

When these hills can hold no more

So shall other lands and races

Lose to their earth-consuming craze. (10-12)

Nongkynrih draws analogy from the pear trees that have been brought to Meghalaya by David Scott, a director of the East India Company who administered in Meghalaya during 1802- 1832 that have "supplant[ed]/ the natives everywhere" (2-3). After a detailed illustration of how the pear trees are to be found everywhere, he speaks of how the trees shed their old leaves in the winter. Comparing the people of Meghalaya to that of the pear trees in their mutual act of shedding their "old ways"

(10), the poet reminds his people that unlike the pear trees, they are not able to shed new trees again any more. Then he proceeds to ask his people a fundamental question:

For how long can we go on,

Living like wind- blown thistle downs? (13-14)

Nongkynrih advocates the cause of protecting the ethnicity of the Khasi in many of his poems. Calling for the protection of their tribe, he asks the women of his land, whose beauty he compares to that of the blushing oranges, to be cautious for "too many bastards/ have been sown in this land" (11-12). Calling them "my sisters" affectionately, he asks them to listen to the wedding bells that seem to call out, "do not give, do not give/ to conquer" (17-18). He asserts that the primary tasks of the marginal ethnic against the various forces that threaten its eradication are to protect and practice their traditional customs:

We who carry on the ways of our fathers

Must protect our own. (28-29)

The poem "Laitkynsew" (2011) is one of the poems where Nongkynrih's role as an instructor is best seen. Written on the midnight of the New Year 2005, the poem talks about the return of the semblance of peace as "our jungle rovers/ are merely roving the city streets,/ armless without arms" (5-7). The poet sees the natural riches of Laitkynsew village and instructs that they should learn to appreciate natural monuments around them; such as the "Living-root Bridges, Living-root Ladder bridges…the Double-decker Root Bridge" (77), which have been revered and wondered at by people across the globe. Assuring his people of the abundance of "breathing beauty of the ancient world" (81), the poet tells his people that they need

to search for enlightenment and inspiration for their songs in nature around them (83-84). The poet then continues:

This is the legacy
we must leave: not bombs and impossible causes, nor
flashy cars and concrete structures, the targets of all our
ambitions, the decay of our lives. (85- 88).

On the other hand, Kharmawphlang, calling himself "this recorder of bitter things" (39) describes the present predicament of Shillong in the poem "Letter to A Dear Friend" (1993). The disintegration faced by the beloved city due to the repercussions of progress and development is clearly portrayed by Kharmawphlang who tells his friend that while the place is "still there" (11), there are changes everywhere; and even their rivers and stones "are being/ pimped for tourists and lately,/ in many places disemboweled mercilessly" (12-14). Kharmawphlang continues to address the issue of commodification that threatens the ethnic identity saying

Their clothes are carried
Away to the lowlands and
Their names are sometimes being changed. (14-17)

Kharmawphlang satirizes his people for their ability to change by asking a rhetoric question to his friend:

Is it
Possible to change the nature
Of a mountain spirit
Or the course of a river? (18-21)

Through these lines, the poet criticizes the nature of his people that is vulnerable to change by highlighting the permanence of the natural world in their

nature. Through these poetical works, the dual persona of the poet as a chronicler of events and instructor of ethnic values that inform the production of poetry are clearly seen.

The sense of loss and recovery that pervades through the poems of the Northeast is indicative of the poets' awareness of their reality. Through their attempt at recovery of the past, the poets do not hint at recovering symbols and signifiers of the past literally but they advocate intellectual recovery of their past so that their ethnicity would prevail in the intellectual make-up of their people. As stated by Gahatraj, "the clash of cultures has often led to the loss of traditional forms and the adoption of new cultural icons threatened the existing ones" (418). While taking about postcolonial culture, Bhabha is convinced that there needs to be a "radical revision of the social temporality in which emergent histories may be written, the rearticulation of the "sign" in which cultural identities may be inscribed" (246). Through their poetical works, poets of the Northeast have recorded their emergent histories wherein their cultural identities are inscribed. These emergent histories are the events that take place in their times; events to which the poets have responded to poetically and politically.

Among other subject matters, Ngangom's poems are indicative of the turmoil of his people in his native land, Manipur which returns as a recurring theme or backdrop throughout his active poetical career. The same images of violence shown in Ngangom's "Curfew" which appeared in his first volume of poetry, *Words and the Silence* (1988), where he talks of how

> People were killed in a lawless firing
> And the streets today observe

Hour long silence for the departed. (13-15)

are still dominant images that recur in his latter poem "To Pacha" (2006) where the poet talks to his fellow poet who has died, describing to him of what had taken place in their native land after he had died:

There are no more tears to shed
In this weathered country where they
Kill pregnant women and children; its
nipples have long gone dry, and leering
death walks your homeland. (7-11)

It is this act of chronicling "subjective realities" in their poetical works that there is the tendency to categorize poems written by poets of the Northeast as "poetry in the time of terror" because the poets have chosen to be "a chronicler of their social reality and write the poetry of guns and insurgency" (Bhattacharyya 2003). It is indeed true, that due to contemporary events that have informed their poems throughout the years, poems written by poets of the Northeast reflect the recurring violence and ethnic clashes that have compounded normalcy of lives from time to time. However, reading poetry in the context of violence and terror has limited the boundaries and scope of the poems. Many anthologies that have published collection of writings from the Northeast seemed to have selected writings that echo such subject matter pertaining to violence and ethnicity. Accepting that creative writers are "chroniclers of subjective realities," poets have written of "the lives that they know" and "want to share with the world" (Ao *Writing…170*). They have spoken of their experiences of horror at violence, corruption, government apathy and other everyday issues of living in a region that has been largely neglected. Moreover, a careful reading of the poetical works of selected poets reveal the process of change that each

individual has gone through in terms of assertion of their ethnicity. While each poets asserted their ethnic identity through their poetry, all of them showed the tendency to move away from the identity issue to probe deeper into humanistic and universal themes as well.

As chroniclers of their time, the poets have responded to their contemporary events in their poems. In the poem "The Parking Lot" (2011), Nongkynrih talks about the construction of a parking lot at Nan Polok in Shillong which "took a year and crores to build" (16). Being told that the lot remained unused because it was to be inaugurated by the Minister for Roads who could not inaugurate due to "the fall of his government" (19), Nongkynrih compares the instability of the government to that of Bollywood movies:

> Here they change parties and governments
>
> Like Hindi film stars changing dresses in a song. (22-23)

Being by-products of Western education, each poet displays an overarching presence of Western modes of thinking and expression. This is evident in one of Ao's poems "Blood of Others" (2011) where the poet, in documenting the history of her people, compares the mindset of her people following the "advent of the Word" (2) among them. She informs that the enamoured people, in their eagerness to learn

> Schooled our minds to become
>
> The ideal tabula rasa
>
> On which the strange intruders
>
> Began scripting a new history. (37-40)

Here, Ao's usage of the term "*tabula rasa*" is indicative of the Western knowledges inherent in the poet, the term being a philosophical term which is etimologically a Latin term meaning "clean slate." Similarly, in Nongkynrih's "Laitkynsew," the poet makes a mention of "the history of the Diaspora" (57) in describing his visit to the village. What the poet suggests through the expression is his situation as a diaspora who has returned from his exile.

The poets who display a zealous dedication of asserting their ethnic identity by going back to their roots in order to resist historiography, government apathy or misrepresentation of their ethnicity by broad categorization and homogenization have displayed an overarching process of hybridization through their poetical works, wherein the idea of ethnicity that they deem superior are questionable. Yet, through this the poets have also displayed the liveliness of their respective cultures where the work of assimilation and acculturation reflect their growth as "unchanging cultures ossify and become sterile" (King 22). In their appropriation of terms and ideas from the West and incorporating them into their poems that are rooted to their culture, these first generation poets who have written in English have brought a pivotal change to Indian writing in English.

Postcolonial situations in Northeast India have stirred up interests of socio-cultural groups and communities to re-examine their identity vis-à-vis old colonial orders and new political dispensations. People's interrogation of the past infringements impacting their identity and producing amnesia as well as their discomfort and disenchantment with new but unfulfilling political systems are staples of poetic thought. One important lesson of rewriting history for the people and the poets of the region is the reawakening from amnesia and renewal of their cultural identity.

Like most poets from the Northeast, Ao feels that the identity of her tribe is under the threat of homogenization which started since the advent of missionaries into their area. She feels that Christianization of the Ao- Nagas had deeply affected the ethnicity of the people. Although Ao's disillusionment is reflected throughout her poetical career, there is no tendency of the poet to dissociate herself from the adopted religion. Aware of the fallacies of religious teachings, the poet as an individual has retained her faith throughout the ordeal of modernist questioning of accepted conventions. Ao's quest for the self against her ethnic identity pervades throughout her long poetical career wherein she has reflected on her individual identity that has been subjected to institutions of power not only in social and religious institutions but also in familial and professional institutions as well. Ao's quest for individual identity and her assertion of ethnic identity vastly differ in that while she is ascertained of her ethnicity, her tryst with her individual identity seems to be an unending process as reflected through her poetical works.

The quest for identity in the midst of multifaceted dimensions is still seen in the works of emerging poets. This alludes to the overwhelming sense of identity that has ingrained itself in the psychological make-up of an individual claiming loyalty to a nation-state. The disconnect between the people of the Northeast with the rest of India that had been addressed by older generation poets like Nongkynrih and Chhangte still resounds in the works of upcoming poets who are still in the process of finding their identity. In her poem "National Anthem" (2017) that speaks of the Northeasterners' disconnect from the mainland, the Mizo poet Lalsangliani Ralte talks of language barrier as her "tongue refuses to caress the words of the anthem/ with ease and eloquence" (22-23), saying that

…every word in the national anthem

is a challenge to my tribal tongue

that is more used to a slightly altered version
of the English alphabet than it is
to the Devanagiri script. (27-31)

The acute awareness of the gap between the Northeasterners and the mainland Indians run throughout the poem. Claiming her difference from the other Indians, the poem ends with the poet's avowal of her loss in the attempt to find her own identity, saying

Remember that I am just as confused
for I am alleging my loyalty to a country
through an anthem
that has to be explained to me
for me to understand
what it means. (41- 46)

Of all the poets within the purview of the thesis, Mamang Dai has shown an incredible form of resistance wherein she has encapsulated the voices of protest within her poetic sensibilities that is fuelled with her intrinsic tribal identity. In other words, she has displayed an overwhelming command of a non-native language and has appropriated it in such a way that she has transcended the orality to the form of writing which in its essence is rival to none other than the grand narratives of poetry.

Postcolonial studies have interpreted the coloniser's attempt, and their success on obliterating the past of colonies under them in order to subvert the psychology of those they deemed inferior to them. They created hegemony by promoting Euro-centric thoughts and by giving the natives subordinate roles. The apparent "white superiority" and their beliefs that they were "destined to rule" which has found its

manifestation in literary works as early as Defoe's Robinson Crusoe had been the forces that impel the colonisers to view the others as "savages," "uncivilised" and "barbarians." To the colonizers anything that was short of their own sense of civilization was primitive and primitive, to them, was among the ranks of animals. According to Franz Fanon, the "colonial vocabulary" is formed of "allusion to the animal world." This alludes to the colonizers' attitude towards the natives whom they considered to be less than human beings. Postcolonial cultural studies started as a "revisionist project" during the 1960's. It started not as a discipline but as "a distinctive problematic" that sought to combine all the problems inherent in the emerging fields of postcolonial discourses. In the words of Georg M. Gubelberger, postcolonial cultural studies is "foremost a shift in emphasis, a strategy of reading, an attempt to point out what was missing in previous analyses, and an attempt to rewrite and to correct." (759)

The poetry of select poets of Northeast India has not distributed ready panacea for all the ills created by history as well as by the poet's own isolation. However, the recent voice of resistance and diversity in poetry is a healthy sign of the national democratic orders and academic freedom which again are subjected to question. The newly emerging tradition of resistance and reclaiming identity has been stabilized in the English language poetry which is widely recognized as unique and consistent in the literature of diversified India.

Although critical attention has been given to the poetical works of select poets of the region, not much attention has been given to the aesthetic value of their poems which will require another extensive study in the future. However, response have been made to the moral purpose of writing as seen through the works that depict the poets' preoccupation in their role as a moralist whose desire is to instruct

their people of the validity of their traditional ways against the corruptive forces of commercialism and globalization. The role of the poets in providing voices to the unrepresented in history and in the contemporary age, to the culturally suppressed marginal and politically exploited people have been assessed as well as their roles as chroniclers writing their oral histories into the visible space through poetry.

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APPENDICES

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NAME OF THE CANDIDATE	: Lalmalsawmi Ralte
DEGREE	: Ph. D
DEPARTMENT	: English
TITLE OF THE THESIS	: Poetic Resistance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Select Poetry of North-east India
DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION	: 29. 07. 2011
APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL	:
1. BOS	: 20. 04. 2012
2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 15. 05. 2012
REGISTRATION NO. & DATE	: MZU/Ph.D/491 of 15.05.2012
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1.	HSLC	Board of Secondary Education, Assam (SEBA)	59.5 %	2002
2.	HSSLC	Assam Higher Secondary Education Council (AHSEC)	63.6 %	2004
3.	BA (English Honors)	Gauhati University	49.9 %	2007
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Other relevant information :

List of Publications:

Sl. No	**Year**	**Title of Chapter/ Research Paper**	**Name of book/ journal**	**Publication details (Place/ Publishers) With ISBN/ ISSN**
1.	2014	The Assertion of Identity: A Study of Temsula Ao's Poetry	Globalization and Ethnic Identity p. 181-189	Place: Guwahati Pub: R.K Pillai for Scientific Book Centre ISBN 978-81-287-0004-0
2.	2014	*Lengkhawm Zai*: An Articulation of Indigenous Cultural Memory of the Mizos (with ZD Lalhmangaihzauva)	Journal of MIELS Vol.1. No.1. May 2014 p. 74-84	Place: Aizawl Pub: Mizoram English Literary Society (MIELS)

				ISSN 2348- 8611
3.	2017	Baby's Night of Happiness by C. Lalnunchanga (Taitea) *Trans. from Mizo to English*	Contemporary Short Stories from Mizoram p. 65- 92	Place: New Delhi Pub: Sahitya Akademi ISBN: 978-93-86771-45-2
4.	2018	Memory of Home: The Diaspora in Select Poems of Agha Shahid Ali	MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies Vol V. Issue 1 June 2018 p. 216-229	Place: Aizawl Pub: Department of English, Mizoram University ISSN: 2348-1188
5.	2019	The Folk in the Soul: An Analysis of the Lyrics of Israela Pachuau	MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies Vol. VI. Issue I. June 2019. p. 53-69	Place: Aizawl Pub: Department of English, Mizoram University ISSN 2348-1188

List of papers presented in Seminars/ Conferences

Sl. No	Year	Title of Paper	Title of Seminar/ Conference	Organizers and Place
1.	2013	Revisiting "High Culture" of the Mizos through Kaphleia's "Chhingpuii"	International Conference on Voices from the Margin: Society, Culture and Exclusion	School of Languages, Central University of Jharkhand
2.	2013	The Assertion of Identity: A Study of Temsula Ao's Poetry	National Seminar on "Globalization and Ethnic Identity"	English and Philosophy Department, Pachhunga University College & Art & Culture Department, Govt. of Mizoram Aizawl
3.	2013	*Lengkhawm Zai*: An Articulation of Indigenous Cultural Memory of the Mizos (with ZD Lalhmangaihzauva)	International Seminar on Cultures of Memory: Mnemocultural Praxis in Southeast and other Asian Countries	English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong Campus
4.	2016	"Fashion Through the Ages:	Second International Seminar on	Department of

		A Pictorial Study of Mizo Popular Culture from Early Christianity till date" (with Lalsangliani Ralte)	"Claiming the Difference: Literatures and Cultures"	English, MZU with NEC, Shillong & ICSSR, New Delhi, Aizawl
5.	2017	Modern and Indigenous: An Introspective Look on Education in Mizoram	International Seminar on "Representing the Self: Addressing the Issues of Ethnicity and Identity Across Domains"	Department of English, Holy Cross College Agartala
6.	2019	Writing as An Expression	Exploring the Creative Mind	Dept. of English, Mizoram University Aizawl

turnitin **Turnitin Originality Report**

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POETIC RESISTANCE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY:

A STUDY OF SELECT POETRY OF NORTH- EAST INDIA

ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED BY:

LALMALSAWMI RALTE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

MIZORAM UNIVERSITY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of English, Mizoram University, Aizawl.

This thesis titled "Poetic Resistance and Ethnic Identity: A Study of Select Poetry of North-East India" is to examine critically poets of diverse ethnicities of Northeast India whose creative achievements are being highly recognized at home and abroad. It is a study on how the selected poets of the region have responded poetically to the widely prevalent perceptions about the Northeast ensued by discursive historiography through poetic resistance. It is an analysis of how selected poets of the region have used their myths and legends in poetry to assert their ethnic identity while focusing on their individual identity. It also analyses on how their poetry centers around the subject of the marginalized man and woman in a matrilineal/patriarchal society which reflects how they try to negotiate with power structure in their respective societies.

Among many poets writing in English, five poets have been selected within the purview of this thesis: Temsula Ao, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. These first generation poets writing in English belong to different major ethnic groups which are identifiable in the Northeast. Looking at the present scenario of English poetry among the writers of Northeast India, it can be well said that not all ethnicities have produced poets of eminence (Misra xxi). However, the poet's probe and sensitive appraisal do cut across the equally distinctive and diverse clan categories and present their experiences that are effectively common and shared. Although there are innumerable poets both in vernacular and English languages, poems from the older poetic traditions such as Assamese, Bengali and Manipuri are not part of the study whereas some poems that have been translated from vernacular languages into English have been taken into consideration.

Poetry of the English language, produced in the contemporary Northeast India is marked by voices of dissent and concerns for ethnic identity. The interest in Indian writing in English in the late 1980s across the nation ushered in an important milestone for writers writing in English in Northeast India. Although there had always been an indisputable strong literary culture in many communities of the region, lack of exposure had kept them under- appreciated and many of their works unrecognized. When talking of literature in the Northeast, the fact that there is a well-established literary culture in vernacular languages like Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri, Khasi, Mizo, Kokborok and others side by side with the growing literature in English language must not be overlooked. Many writers such as Indira Goswami, Malsawmi Jacob, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih are bilingual. As mentioned by Nongkynrih, there had already existed a strong literary tradition among the people of the Northeast even before the advent of Western education in the region (viii), it is undeniable that education has helped in stimulating literary culture among the people of the Northeast.

Despite the fact that Western education was introduced by the missionaries as early as the end of the nineteenth century, literary writings in English began rather late in the region. The few that were published by the turn of the twentieth century were overshadowed by the existing vernacular literature (Dutta 2018). Moreover, in the literary tradition of the older generation such as Manipuri literature, there were significant changes that took place due to the influence of modern education brought about by Western education (Singh 151). The requirements for stability of the new form of modern literature, the process of acculturation that require an extensive process of assimilation and internalization of different cultures, the “transition from the oral to the written” (Zama xii) and the lack of market for English writings might

have contributed to the belated production of writings in English among the different communities. However, there has been tremendous growth of writings in English across the region in the past few years both in the form of original works and translations that constitute a whole body of "emerging" literature in the Northeast (Zama xi) and both national and international magazines and journals have shown unprecedented interest in literary works of the Northeast since 2008 (Miri 2). According to Misra, many critics and scholars of this emerging body of literature in English are quick to notice its stark difference from mainstream Indian writing in English. This is often because of the writers' tendency to respond to prevalent cultures through their acute awareness of cultural loss and recovery (Misra xiii); a loss which is different from mainstream India due to different experiences of colonialism in the Northeast but which is a shared experience among the many tribes living in the region who were "isolated" from the rest of India during British imperialism.

It is briefly to mention here the checkered history of Northeast India so as to invoke good reasons for the culture-conscious tribes and non-tribes of this region and as a stimulant of their poetic endeavours. The Northeast is inhabited by three major groups, classified as "the hills tribes, plains tribes and non-tribal population of the plains" (Singh 258). According to the 2011 Census of India, the total population of the tribes inhabiting the northeastern part of India is 46 million, constituting 44.23 % of the total 104 million population of India's tribals. Inhabitants of Northeast India speak over 220 different languages and dialects; ranging from Indo- European, Trans-Himalayan/Sino-Tibetan, Kra–Dai, Austro-asiatic with inclusion of some Creole language families. Of them, Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri and Bodo have been recognized among the 22 official languages of India. Religion-wise, according to 2011

Census of India, 54.02% of the total population are Hindus, Muslims 25.05%, 17.24% Christians, 1.37% Buddhist, 0.07% Jain, 0.07% Sikh and 1.97% of the population belong to other indigenous religions.

The poetry of Northeast India is diverse and has age-old traditions that descended from the oral tradition of folktales and folksongs. These oral traditions were handed down from one generation to the other in informal systems like dormitories and in other occasions through chants, songs and stories. In fact, many communities in Northeast India have "a vibrant storytelling tradition" which "has continued as the dominant influence on the literary creations from the region" (Misra xvii). These oral traditions became important markers of identity as the creation stories, myths and folktales including indigenous knowledge were contained. Referring to Ao-Naga oral tradition, Longkumer says of the vital role that they played: that it was their oral tradition that played the fundamental role in shaping not just their history, but also their religion as well as their social life (11). Similarly, the Khasi stories have been handed down from one generation to the next through oral tradition where the elders in the community took the responsibility of teaching morals to the children (Mawrie 58). In his collection of the myths of Arunachal Pradesh, Elwin had remarked that although there are depictions of external influences, some myths retain their originality by being "greatly altered, into the body of the mythology" (xx) and while many are "rich in 'poetic' ideas" (xxi), many myths also reflect the realistic temperament of imagination by the presence of "ugly people in their stories" side by side with "many lovely creatures whose memory has come down from generation to generation" (xxii). Despite the differences in material culture, BirendranathDatta states that there is "a certain 'commonness' and 'togetherness'" in the folklore material of the Northeast (122) and a closer study reveals that these oral traditions reflect the

tribes' awareness of the presence of their neighbours through the inclusion of "'non-tribals' in the plains" in their myths and legends (125) which reveals the comprehensive world-view that they possessed.

The first chapter situates the poetical works of select poets of Northeast India in the emerging literary scenario.It is a brief presentation of the historiography of Northeast India as found in older traditions of narration such as in Xuansang's account of his visit to Kamarupa during the reign of Bhaskar Varman during 603-604 AD to colonial intervention in the nineteenth century till date when colonial historiography has been challenged and attempts at rewriting one's history has become an essential intellectual exercise among many tribes in the Northeast. This chapter also highlights issues such as misrepresentation of the Northeast and its people, lack of developmental works, government apathy, problem of immigrants and corruption which are part of the everyday life in the Northeast thereby laying foregrounds for analyses in the following chapters within the thesis.

The contacts of the British administrators and the people of the Northeast at different intervals in the early nineteenth century was the meeting of two different worlds: while the former had already imbibed a very complex self-conscious notion of superiority backed by scientific advancements in accordance to the Western world, the latter was still living among jungles and treacherous mountains with their own moral codes in their secluded way of life. Eventually the people inhabiting the Northeastern part of India became subjected to binary oppositions created by colonial hierarchy as an outcome of the difference between the colonists and the natives which was "organized philosophically…[and] had the effect of demonizing and denigrating what Western people often term the other" (Young 15). This attitude of the British administrators allowed them to have what Edward Said generally calls

"positional superiority" (7) in their relationship with the natives. This again worked a polarization among the natives who according to the colonizers, would remain divided within the colonial society, so that colonialism "would survive and reproduce itself" (Sharma 62). The natives are thus reduced to colonial stereotypes, relegated as they are to "a substitute and a shadow" (Bhabha 117) in the "stereotypical knowledges" (118) of colonial discourse.

In terms of historiography, because the privilege of the written word rested with the administrators, the people living in the tribal regions came to be marginalized through the power of the written and printed form (Misra 14), an intellectual exercise which was, in the words of Manorama Sharma, to "uphold colonialism" (64). Reliance on official documents and records of the British administrators by the latter historians has further exposed the people of the Northeast to biases in historiography. This is where many poets of the region have taken up the role of chroniclers of their history through their poetical works in the attempt to provide alternative history through probing their myths and legends which often lends a sense of rootedness to their poetical works because "the people of northeastern India often construct migration stories in an attempt to explain the history and present distribution of the tribes" (Burling). Although these myths and legends may not be proper history, they do fill up the gaps in history, thereby providing, according to BaishaliBaruah, an "alternative history challenging the 'official' history of modern India" (3).

The concept of the Northeast as a homogenous entity has subjected the people of the Northeast to stereotypical bias leading to the failure of identifying the uniqueness of each tribe in the region. Poets of the region have responded to this perception of homogeneity by asserting the individuality of their respective ethnicities.

Reflecting on the subject-matters of poetry produced in the region, Baruah states that "the political dimension has a heavy stake on the literature forcing the articulation of polyphonic voices that attest to the multiple reality of the North-east" (3).

The second chapter titled "Poetry and the Political Space" examines how the poets have responded to historical bias by providing "alternative histories" through their poetical works. Provision of alternate histories amidst discursive reiterative colonial historiography involvesintellectual exercise of recognizing the multifaceted loss of one's culture, religion, and cultural signifiers that entails the reclamation of their indigenous land, assertion of native intelligence and religion.

Employing their myths and legends, poets of the region have taken up the role of chroniclers of their history by subverting the previous written word and providing alternative voices through their poems. In doing so, the poets have attempted at intellectual reclamation of their histories that had been "annihilated" by colonial historiography. In such act, the art of poetry writing becomes a highly political act with the poets themselves taking up the role not only of creative writers but also of historians who become responsible to provide "alternative history" of their people. Speaking of the permeating political nuances in poetry, Monalisa Changkija, an eminent journalist from Nagaland, affirms the importance of poetry writing:

> In the Northeast, there are many things one cannot write as a journalist. I have had my experiences while doing so, and then I found poetry is also another vehicle to express one's anger and protest. (Zama 141)

The forces that led to the corrosion of the indigenous was not only bullets and dishonest money but also religion. Despite the compliant acceptance of Christianity as a harbinger of modernity and change by the early native historians, in

recent times poets of the region have questioned the validity of the teachings of the Church at the cost of their indigenous faith and beliefs which were once part of their intrinsic identity. Through poetry written by different poets of Northeast India, the shift from the compliant acceptance of faith to that of contest is apparent to a degree of disbelief in the gospel; dispossessing a modernist tendency of questioning establishments in order to look for spaces to deconstruct.

The colonial world was not interested in frontier building alone; in the belief of its discourse the natives were but poor, pitiful people whose primitive ways needed to be shifted towards modernity. While the abolition of chieftainship was crucial in order to thwart native resistance, colonial rule also led to the abolition of many other cultural signifiers that are crucial to the identity and cultural formations of the natives which eventually hampered the identity of the native, reducing them to what Dai calls "stone" in the poem "The Obscure Place" (2011).

Colonial hierarchy was successful in creating "a Westernized native" (Nayar 45), deeply ingrained in the socio-ideological construct of colonialism. Kharmawphlang has brought out the disruptive consequences of such construct among his people by claiming that Western education was a "wisdom of falsehood" and abandonment of indigenous knowledge have made themselves their own worst enemies in his poem "Letter from Pahambir" (2011).

Segregation of the Northeast from the mainland during the British and its subsequent adoption of the policy following the 1947 Independence from the British rule had led to the aggravation of disparity between the Northeasterners and the mainland. Poets have addressed to the failure of the attempts to foster integration by highlightingthe divide between the people of the Northeast and those in the mainland while dealing with governmental apathy towards issues such as violence, terrorism

and immigrants where poetry becomes the voices that articulate protest and resistance. It is in a scenario that calls for the "third voice" that poets become, in the words of Nongkynrih, "chroniclers of subjective realities" who represent a region that has been "striving to reach out to the rest of the world from its historically and geographically marginalized position" (Misra xxix). That "the fissures within the modern nation state and its hegemonic project has clearly led to the reinforcement of ethnic voices" (Baruah 3) is apparent as the poets "define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures" (Baral x).

One of the many differences that ensued in friction between the colonial power and the natives of the Northeast is the sense of possession towards the land. To the natives, the land is not just their home or where they receive their source of sustenance but part of their existence, to which they are intrinsically bonded. Poets have asserted their claim to their lands as important identity markers because they are part of the "indigenous history" of the land, a form of "material artefacts…from [the] past so that [the poet] can narrate their own histories" (Nayar 57). This so done, is part of the attempt to rewrite their own history which had been annihilated by colonial historiography.

The third chapter of the thesis, "Poetry as a Site for the Marginalized Human" deals with the examination of the voices of people who have been marginalized by the structure of different establishments and is a comparative reading of the differences in the experiences of men and women.

Within different communities in the region at differing levels, the woman has been otherized by customary and social systems which is reflective of male authority

within the social construct. Foucault has stated in *Power/ Knowledge* (1980) that "power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization" and that "individuals are the vehicles of power, not its application" (98). While women in the Northeast are considered to occupy better positions at home and within the social mileau than those of their mainstream counterparts within the country (Brara 83), they are still subjected to what Meeta Deka calls "historical amnesia" (xvii) and "double positioning" (Loomba 135) especially in historiography. Within the space of literature, the different roles and social and personal relevance have been creatively unveiled by poets of the region, thereby providing a space for the marginalized human to resist against such positioning.

Feminist cultural theory has commented on the construction of gender by society where a woman, in the words of Judith Butler (1990), "performs" according to the norms of the society. In the poetical works of select poets, there are reflections where women are performers according to the expectations of the society; such as seen in their conviction of women as "bearers of culture" which is a collaboration of colonialism and patriarchal tradition "to keep women 'in their place'" (Loomba 186). Some poetical works of Nongkynrih reflect that women themselves indulge in the act of oppression and discrimination against the less fortunate women which reflects their internalization of patriarchy wherein the women, as noted by Simone De Beauvior, "are measured by the standard of men and found 'inferior'" (Nayar*Contemporary…* 88).Ao has subverted the politics of gender and sexuality where a woman speaks of her own sexuality through her earlier poems by presenting female experiences in what has been a male- dominated representation of gender.

Many layers of signifiers subvert perceptions of a matrilineal society where women are as much subjected to prejudices as in a patriarchal society. In fact, the status of women

in a matrilineal society of Meghalaya is not completely free of male domination and poetical works affirm Brara's observation of the real status of women in Meghalaya's Khasi society contrary to its tradition of hallowed matrilineality, which unveils the actual social and political status of women (84).

Domestic violence is one way in which the powerless man within the structure of matrilineal society vents out his frustration, as observed by Passah in her essay, "Gender History in Khasi- Jaintia Hills" (2017). Nongkynrih's projection of domestic violence in"Only My Tenant" (1992) is a reflection of the "intricacies of Khasi male insecurity" (Passah 326) which has been the result of a desperate act committed by most men who feel that the matrilineal society has "depriv[ed] them of their rights" (Passah 325) in terms of inheritance and children. In deconstructing the signifiers in the poem,the condition of a hapless man caught in matrilineal society can clearly be seen. Basing the argument on the study of psychological self- dehumanization, both the tenant and her husband have been caught in the structure of the society where they both constitute victimhood under the cycle of powerlessness.

Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990) discusses on how women are subjugated by the myth of beauty which, in her words, is "like many ideologies of femininity" and which under patriarchy, "mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women's attempts to increase their power" (15). The long tradition of patriarchy seeks the subversion of these older and wiser women through the myth of beauty. Her sense of confidence and self-awareness is stripped off her by the concept of beauty that privileges young women over old. Poets of the region have reflected how the beauty myth has been ingrained in their sensibilities through their works. Many of Ao's poems on self- recognition have attested to how women

can be freed of such societal construct by bringing out the importance of self-awareness in a society that threatens individuality.

Foucault's concept of power that has been a discursive constructwhichprivileges one over the other has been echoed by poets in many of their works. While Nongkynrih's poems reveal the struggles of a man in a matriarchal society, Ngangom's poems attest to Foucault's concern that "power is everywhere" (63). He brings out the helplessness of his people by addressing to the totalitarian nature of rule where "nothing is certain" (Strange Affair, III.15).

The fourth chapter "Claiming Ethnic Identity" is a study on the presentation of ethnic identity through poetical works in order to assess the extent to which poets have been successful in the assertion of their ethnic identity by studying their voices of resistance in the contemporary times.

The question of identity is an emotive issue having serious implications among the tribes of Northeast India. Identity is an important factor that marks an individual into a community having its own regional identity. Inhabited by different groups of people who have settled down in the region in different times, the Northeast is home to various ethnic entities; leading to the presence of great diversity "in terms of language, dress code, food habits, and ethnic composition" (Mahanta 98). The complex nature of identity in the Northeast owes to the existence of religious differences, "the morphological ethnic divide between the upland and lowland communities," and "the socio-anthropological tribal and non-tribal divide" (Rajkumar 47). Unlike anywhere else, "the heterogeneous nature of the composition and mix of various ethnicities confined within a very small physical area" (47) in the Northeast has added to the complexity of identity politics in the region. Because of the Northeasterners'

multifaceted disconnect from national identity, regional identity is the dominant marker which has become a sensitive issue in times as more and more sub-identities within the region have striven for their political independence. Eventually, this has led to ethnic clashes in the region as "identity politics are hijacked by insurgent groups" (Mahanta 105) which has resulted in swirls of violence time after time.

However, identity formation in the Northeast has undergone tremendous changes in course of time. Due to the nature and pattern of their migration, Chaube has mentioned that "racial purity" among many tribes of the Northeast is questionable (2). Identity theorists have stated that identity, like ethnicity, is rather a construct of the "by-products of political and extraneous considerations to derive personal or political mileage whenever the situation demands" (Rajkumar 25). Thus, the nature of identity is not always exclusive but malleable according to the needs of those in power. This distinct characteristic of identity in the Northeast did not escape the attention of the British administrators who in their accounts of the people of the region talked about the problem of differences among the people not only in terms of spoken language but also of geographical locations (Chaube 32).

Colonialism has not only rejected many ethnic ways of life and cultural practices, but it has also affected the minds of the people where concepts of the West have been increasingly internalized by younger generations who are more susceptible to the progress and developments that have been brought about by science and technology, modern education, religion and globalization. Since its earliest inception, colonialism as an institution has brought about a cultural divide wherein the natives who eventually have imbibed colonial binaries began to adapt to what has been considered as the stronger of the two accordingly. This acculturate stress has not only "shaped and reshaped the cultural identities of most communities in the

Northeast" but "Christianity has added another dimension to cultural loss and recovery" (Gahatraj 418). In course of time, they have become, in the words of Kharmawphlang (2011), "their own worst enemies," (60) by becoming culturally alienated. This sense of loss of identity and identification has continued to wreck the minds of the younger generations till date as reflected in Ao's "Blood of Others" (2011) where she laments her grandchildren's rejection of their legends as "ancient gibberish".

Following postcolonial attempt at recovering one's past, poets of the region have used the medium of poetry as a platform to assert their ethnic identity. Because postcolonial writings seek to recover from colonial stereotyping, poets have negotiated with their present hybridized identity by going back to their mythic past where the folk elements become "a forked weapon of assimilation and dissemination" (Syiem 218) and they have used the medium of poetry to "write back" in order to claim their ethnicity against colonial stereotypes.

The concluding chapter is a summarization of the findings of the thesis to give a coherent conclusion. Poetic resistance emerging from Northeast India, as this study attempts to explore, is found to be multifaceted in literary sensibility. This resistance is not a new phenomenon in the Northeast, since its early expressions are available in modern vernacular literatures prior to modern English poetry. The poetic voices of resistance and difference is characteristically motivated by love of rootedness and identity issues. Despite being exposed to colonial education and thought, the colonizer's culture could not penetrate deep into the minds of the natives. Despite the fact that material culture displays as "overarching influence of

modernity," it cannot be denied that "exclusionary tribal identities remain strong" among the people of the Northeast (Das 6).

Postcolonial situations in Northeast India have stirred up interests of socio-cultural groups and communities to re-examine their identity vis-à-vis old colonial orders and new political dispensations. People's interrogation of the past infringements impacting their identity and producing amnesia as well as their discomfort and disenchantment with new but unfulfilling political systems are staples of poetic thought. One important lesson of rewriting history for the people and the poets of the region is the reawakening from amnesia and renewal of their cultural identity.

Although critical attention has been given to the poetical works of select poets of the region, not much attention has been given to the aesthetic value of their poems which will require another extensive study in the future. However, response have been made to the moral purpose of writing as seen through the works that depict the poets' preoccupation in their role as a moralist whose desire is to instruct their people of the validity of their traditional ways against the corruptive forces of commercialism and globalization. The role of the poets in providing voices to the unrepresented in history and in the contemporary age, to the culturally suppressed marginal and politically exploited people have been assessed as well as their roles as chroniclers writing their oral histories into the visible space through poetry.

The poetry of select poets of Northeast India has not distributed ready panacea for all the ills created by history as well as by the poet's own isolation. However, the recent voice of resistance and diversity in poetry is a healthy sign of the national democratic orders and academic freedom which again are subjected to question. The newly emerging tradition of resistance and reclaiming identity has been stabilized in

the English language poetry which is widely recognized as unique and consistent in the literature of diversified India.

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