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UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY, CONFLICT, AND TRAUMA THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS OF SELECTED WOMEN WRITERS OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Key words: Conflict, Gender, Identity, Literary texts, Northeast India, Peace and Trauma.

ABSTRACT: Literature is a consequential medium that reflects human phenomena through artistic mode. It helps in recalling past traumatic experiences though more often in a masked form. The memories of the bellicose conflicts are recounted by the victims long after the harrowing events get safely buried in history and no longer accessible to the present. People conventionally forget the source of the trauma yet they recollect it through literary betokens like poems, musical compositions, plays, novels, stories, etc. The literary texts play a vital role in recalling and understanding a particular conflict through the wounded psyche which no historical or any other narratives can reach as efficaciously. This is one of the main reasons why literary discourses rather than historical narratives are comparatively more efficacious in portraying conflicts. This manuscript highlights what literature tells us about a particular conflict that social science literature has missed on. It additionally accentuates how literary discourses of select women writers from Northeast India proved to be more reliable representations of conflicts because they endeavor to capture the unknowable and inexpressible far more efficaciously through tropes and images. The manuscript is unique in the sense that it attempts to establish a periscopic understanding of identity, conflict, and trauma within literary prisms and for this, the manuscript

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utilizes the inditements of six women writers from northeast India like *Arupa Patangia Kalita*, *Ratna Bharali Talukdar* (State of Assam), *Temsula Ao*, *Easterine Iralu* (State of Nagaland), *Irom Sharmila*, and *Ningombam Sunita* (State of Manipur).

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a unique tool that harvests its yield by traversing through the raw experiential and existential dimensions of human reality at micro and intangible domains. In societies with a protracted history of socio-political conflicts, such as in Northeast India, literature captures raw and insightful glimpses of the invisible or what Martin Buber aptly calls “hal- lowing the profane”. While academic or political writings on issues of peace or conflict concentrate on state-centric policies, literary works (especially novels, short stories, and poems) are rhetorical, reactionary, and evaluative responses to any social phenomenon. Peace and conflict are multidimensional, clustered issues that need introspective analysis of a series of events. It is generally accepted that psychosomatic and behav- ioral aspects, as well as structural conditions for alienation, combine to fuel conflict. Therefore, understanding of any conflict needs comprehen- sive, proper, evaluative study of all these interrelated issues and hence it should be interdisciplinary by nature. This interdisciplinary nature of the emerging area of research on peace or conflict is what justifies the inclu- sion of literary writings within this arena. Literary writings are humane and holistic approaches to record, examine, interpret, and appraise responses and reactions towards issues of peace and conflict. Literary inscriptions are perceived to be ingenious endeavors to make people able to analyze the pros and cons of an issue and additionally to equip people with skills to deal with conflict constructively.

Against this backdrop, the present manuscript endeavors to explore how some select women writers from the north-eastern part of India have dealt with the issue of conflict and its known aspects in the form of short stories, novels, and poems. Since the later part of the twentieth century, Northeast India has been witnessing the emergence of a potent group of writers, inditing respectively in their vernacular languages as well as in English.

It should be noted that the north-eastern part of India consists of eight states, namely Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Sikkim, and for more than five decades, these north-eastern states have witnessed political turmoil which often escalates to violence, revolt, and belligerent conflicts. Except for the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Sikkim, which are expected to have a comparatively halcyon condition at the moment, the other north-eastern states are troubled by violence. For example, one of the longest-lasting military conflicts in the world is the Naga insurgency that began in the 1950s and is considered the mother of the Northeast rebels. Other states, such as Manipur, Assam, Nagaland, and Tripura have also faced scales of controversies and astringent conflicts. No other place in India or South Asia has been subjected to such a long, brutal battle (Choudury-2021). The north-eastern region of India is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally very different from other states of India as much of the tribes of the region have been traditionally related to the Tibeto-Burman/Mongoloid stock and closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, India-2009). While cultural and racial diversity may not be the main reason for violence in northeast India, one of the key trouble areas is that the Northeast is divided territorially in such a way that during the phase of delineating state borders after the independence of India in 1947, the ethnic and cultural specificities were grossly neglected, giving rise to resentment and unrest. When the colonial rulers of India annexed the north-eastern hilly region they mainly governed it as a loose 'frontier province' and refrained from strictly imposing the concept of the central administration. The scenario changed after the establishment of the Indian republic which introduced the concept of central administration in this region. The manuscript attempts to determine how, in the form of short stories, novels, and poetry, certain selected women authors from the north-eastern part of India are attempting to cope with the topic of violence and its genitive facets. The next part of the manuscript presents the literature review, the framework and methodology, and the discussion and conclusions of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The magnification and development of identity, conflict, and trauma have been perpetuated through a series of ruins and ravagement that occurred in human history. A conflict may end but its effect on human minds persists much longer than the conflict itself. The victims of conflict suffered sundry forms of psychological and physical trauma which have been enormously illustrated in the literary texts of fiction writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Feminist ruminators have struggled with the relationship between women and war. Women's roles in wars of national liberation are even more intricate. A deep but unreconciled conflict subsists between identities predicated on gender and identities predicated on nationality, and between feminism and patriotism (Griffin, 1998).

Anne Frank's, *The Diary of a young girl* (1947) is the diary ingression of a teenager which reveals the true story of two Jewish families who fled from Germany to Amsterdam to elude the horrors of the holocaust during the second world war. The horrific experiences of the oppressed and the sympathetic situation they find themselves result in their exposure to trauma and conflict arising due to their identity. Anne the protagonist is subjected to the feeling of solitude, isolation, and fear. She wonders the reason abaft the oppression and persecution of Jews and the brutal circumstance of the holocaust (Frank, 2019).

The *Three Guineas* by Virginia Woolf illustrates the psychological effect of war. In this study, she attempts to answer the question, how could we obviate war? According to Woolf the ubiquity of war in society is dominated by oppressive conceptions of masculinity (Woolf-1938). Woolf advocates for the inclusiveness of women in power-sharing and decision-making to avoid war. Likewise, war will not culminate while power is governed by the same terms of history which men have established in the absence of a moiety of society (Allsopp, 2015). On page 197 of *Three Guineas*, Woolf throws light on the intricate relationship between women and war and abnegating the conception of female patriotism, Woolf declares "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world. This gives the perception that the convivial contract between state and denizen did not elongate to

women. The argument for the consequentiality of locating traumatic experiences within categorical cultural and historical contexts is made by Cary Caruth. She insists that literary texts are instruments by which the nature of the trauma is revealed by the witnesses (Caruth, 1996). Caruth's, *Experience: Trauma, narrative, and history* expounds that why people traumatized find themselves traumatized again in life. The works of Shoshana Felman further helps in exploring the nature of traumatic events and their response. Shoshana Felman argues that testimony (understood here as the act of witnessing traumatic events) is a consequential and valuable replication to the perpetual consequences of traumatic history (Felman, 2013).

Patricia Resick explicates that traumatic events lead to vehement emotions which avert the person from an event with subsisting noetic schemes, this is because the recollections of the event cannot be dissociated from consciousness (Resick, 2014. p. 62). Stressing on the significance of literature in understanding trauma and conflict, Miriam Cooke argues, "There is no one history, no one story about a war that has a greater claim to the truth but that history is made up of multiple stories, many of them her stories, which emanate from and then reconstruct events. Each story is told by someone who experienced war..." (Cooke, 1996).

Traumatic stress in life is induced by life-threatening, self-threatening, or emotionally painful occurrences (Resick, 2014. p. 28). However, the modern concept of trauma also includes day-to-day experiences or activities that can lead to phrenic frailties. Centuries have passed but the human predicament has remained relatively constant for generations. Rising rates of helplessness, anxiety, lack of self-control, and unfaithfulness are the direct consequences of conflict and trauma. The other predominant causes for traumatic feelings and conflict are ravishment, domestic violence, child abuse, impecuniosity, sexual assaults, natural calamities, man-made disasters, pandemic, death, gregarious and religious intolerance, chaos, discontentment, etc These traumatic experiences, encounters, and impacts have been succinctly depicted by the fiction writer in their works, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Susan Choi's *American Woman*, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *The Tiger Claw*, and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, among many others.

In India, the literature of writers like Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginama*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *My Place in the World*, Anita Desai's *Cry The Peacock*, Sashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, among many others exhibit the significance of literature in understanding trauma and conflict.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Northeast India has seen persistent conflict which also gets reflected from its literature. The North-eastern Indian literature is sometimes interpreted as "literature of terror," "literature that is too conflict-ridden," "literature that portrays aggression and anger," "aggression as a thematic interest," etc. (Longkumer, 2014). Yet meticulous analysis reveals that a continuous attempt to maintain peace has been made in all these writings. Major topics of conflict have been reviewed and cross-checked, the credible status of security measures evaluated, the sham and petty hypocrisy of power-play revealed and dispute resolution mechanisms (government or non-governmental) critically tested. Conflict and peace problems have also been investigated and re-examined from all possible angles. What leads to conflict? What constitutes peace? What are the basic determinants of a peaceful existence? Why even endless efforts for peace do not end up the conflict? Do people know the difference between positive and negative peace? Likewise, there are endless queries related to peace and conflict and even though much literature is available on the ground to define them yet much is still to be explored. Literary narratives of conflict are often considered as secondary to the historical narratives of conflict yet these narratives are consequential given to the fact that they indirectly pass on the innate erudition of the past and secondary traumatization to the post-conflict generation.

This manuscript utilizes the inditements of six women writers like *Arupa Patangia Kalita*, *Ratna Bharali Talukdar* (State of Assam), *Temsula Ao*, *Easterine Iralu* (State of Nagaland), *Irom Sharmila*, and *Ningombam Sunita* (State of Manipur). All of them are venerated with prestigious literary awards and their inditements have magnetized scholastic attention.

These writers are associated with three categorical genres of literature—short story, novel, and poetry and all six of them write in their respective vernacular languages as well as in English and most of them have witnessed conflict in different calibers and dealt with it in their inscriptions. Among them, *Irom Sharmila* was associated with sixteen-year-long fasting for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in the state of Manipur. *Arupa Patangia Kalita* was an active activist of the Assam Movement (1979–1985), a movement led by a group of adolescent leaders demanding identification and deportation of illicit immigrants from Bangladesh along with issues of an identity crisis, economic exploitation, socio-political safeguards, cultural threats, etc. *Temsula Ao* and *Easterine Iralu* have been live observers of conflicts arising out of ethnic and identity issues in one of the most volatile states of Northeast-Nagaland. *Ningombam Sunita* is a comparatively puerile writer from the state of Manipur, a representative of the younger generation who had experienced all possible bellicose manifestations of socio-economic conflict in the denomination of nationalism, identity, and ethnicity.

A comparative approach to literary discourse exhibits that these writers through their work have largely favored the idea of gender inclusion. These writers have silently portrayed the unclad authenticity of the region's suffering by recording the perspectives of prevalent people and highlighting the conflicts faced by them. The majority of the work done by these writers deal with the volatile socio-political conflict and its consequences. In the context of Northeast India, peace turns out to be a more critically overloaded term as the region has experienced all types of conflicting occurrences leading to varied forms of violence. In a region where violence and oppression are legitimized by the power, these writers have been endeavoring to portray the unclad truths of belligerent conflict and to rehabilitate the torn social fabric by pointing out the mistakes and miscommunications where everyone has a component. These writers have managed to prosperously capture the sufferings, causes, and effects, perspectives, and prospects of the mundane people in the backdrop of the protracted identity conflict, ethnic, separatist forms of movements in the region that has been going on since India's independence. They have withal highlighted the mistakes committed by sundry actors working in conflict-

prone zones of Northeast India. On one hand, they provide documentative details of the sundry facets of the prevailing status of peace and conflict in the region, and on the other hand, they accommodate as morality tales of admonition. These writers have highlighted the protracted sufferings of the region which have always been a digression in the mainstream of the Indian nation-state – ironically, even in the mainstream arts that otherwise come across as very charged and political. While these writers share their commonality in dealing with the issues of conflict, violence, insurgency, or sub-nationalism, they additionally have their distinctive characteristics in their narrative techniques, ideological overtone, and perspectives towards the social upheavals. Besides their involution in the phenomena of tranquillity and conflict; recollection, nostalgia, optical discernment, and discussion additionally build the substructure of their narratives.

The manuscript uses text analysis to discuss how the novels of some select women north-east writers of India endeavor to address the issue of identity, conflict, and trauma. It culls the work of some select Feminist Indian writers of north east India as these writers could be visually perceived as struggling with the relationship between women and conflict. The role played by women in the conflict of northeast India is furthermore intricate and perplexed as a deep but unreconciled conflict subsists between identities predicated on gender and identities predicated on nationality, and between feminism and patriotism (Griffin, 1998). The manuscript analyses the narrative style of each novelist in representing trauma, identity, and conflict during insurgency and unrest in north-east India predicated on the recollection of recollections and the lives of each character. The manuscript further argues that the identity of protagonists has been gregariously and culturally constructed by the novelists while portraying their characters. The manuscript further accentuates how the literary discourses of selected women writers from Northeast India have proved to be more reliable representations of conflicts because they seek to capture the unknowable and inexpressible much more efficaciously through tropes and images.

Instead of discussing the literary aspects of the cited works, the paper would delimit its study on the multiple aspects of the conflict as portrayed

in the inscriptions. The selected literary texts of these writers, at times, may seem to be sublimely extraneous to mundane authenticity but uncannily provide a deep insight into that authenticity. Through the representation of traumas and memories associated with volatile conflicts in the north-eastern states of India, and their impact on the life of the protagonists, these women writers pose some pertinent questions in the context of writing about consciousness which does not accord with any formal or unidimensional type of narratives. Thus the Northeast India which is also referred to as “anthropologists’ paradise”, these “contemporary writings from the Northeast show what an exhilarating place it is to be in: backed by a vigorous, vibrant literary tradition, and surging with fresh ideas” (Gill, 2009).

These writers endeavor to portray conflict through social-political and cultural mosaic. The literary novels of these writers could be perceived as ‘trauma fiction’ in the sense their work focuses on a consequential role in the impartment of peace edification. They have utilized stylistic implements like designating, negating, representing actions, transformation, subordination, information structure, events, and states; assumptions, and implications; to represent time, space, and society.

The narratives of these women writers engender secondary traumatization for both them and their children to engender paramount lives in the shadow of their tragedies (Frankish, 2012; Jill, 2012). Their narratives adscitiously highlight a kind of intrinsic knowledge cognate to conflict and trauma that impacts the society. However, as this innate knowledge of the past can only ever be indirect (Jansen-2009) for the post-conflict generation, how such cognizance is conveyed becomes more pertinent.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The novel *Felanee* by Arupa Patangia Kalita portrays the character of a woman named *Felanee*. The name *Felanee* means ‘discarded one’. It is the story of a woman who does not belong to any ethnic group of Assam. Her grandmother hailed from a powerful *mouzadar* (landlord) family and her

father comes from a migrant *Bengali* family. *Felanee* herself married a man from the Assamese *Koch* tribal community and spent her early married life in a Bengali dominated village of jute cultivators. When ultra-nationalists kill her husband and all neighbors and destroy the village, *Felanee* is forced to move to a refugee camp along with her little son. *Felanee* starts a new life and resettles in another small village constituted of a group of women victims, all survivors like her. These women give her emotional support as well as economic assistance and help her in starting her own petty business even though they were themselves poor. It can be seen that it is the feeling of shared suffering and work that binds all the women of this community. This bonding of work and shared suffering helps these struggling women to fight against all odds in a violence laden atmosphere. *Felanee*, a timid and traumatized woman transforms into a strong and victorious survivor who leads her female friends in staging a *dharna* (protest) in front of the police station to secure the release of the men folks detained there. The novel makes a very strong point on the need to represent and amplify the marginalized voices in a society that is becoming more univocal and masculinized due to the prolonged conflict and militancy. It also not only offer insight into the past but also provide scope to live forward with hope. The novel is set on the socio-economic turmoil as a by-product of different agitations the state of Assam went through. It deals with a wide account of hostile happenings borne out of those conflicts. *Felanee*, the protagonist of the novel, dismissing the logic for carving a separate Bodoland state from the state of Assam, tells her fellowman—“What will you get in your state? Have not you seen the predecessors? They have turned the entire state into a graveyard in the name of a golden state... let burn everything again, let everything be burnt away” (pp. 175). This statement reveals the futility of the conflict resolution strategies opted in the region. Northeast India has undergone numerous conflict resolution (peacebuilding) mechanisms in the form of peace accords, ceasefire, autonomy grants, territorial arrangements, etc. But whether these mechanisms are effective in bringing peace? In the above-quoted statement, *Felanee* exposes the gap between the reality and projections of Assam Accord¹. The novel further reveals that common people were hardly informed of the clauses or the objectives of the Assam Accord, signed

between the Government of India and the movement patrons on 15th August 1985. People of the periphery hardly came to know what the accord offered for them. *Irom Sharmila*, in her poems, shows how the common people of *Manipur* do not even know the full form of *AFSPA* (*Armed Force Special Power Act*). Stories like *Khongji Makhol* and *Ngairi Ngasisu* by *Ningombam Sunita* reflect the necessity of cross-community dialogues before designing a peace-building strategy. Respective governments hardly offer any space for the common people to take part in the decision-making process of peacebuilding. So, despite a long list of peace accords operating in the Northeast, the youth of an ethnic group of the region can easily proclaim the birth of a new extremist group. This failure of state-sponsored policies is beautifully represented in the novel *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo* when despite the provisions of lucrative rehabilitation or resettlement policies, Garati Murmu, one of the central characters of the novel, was firm to send her daughter *Sorla* to Delhi to work in a “placement service”, though from within she knew that it would be nothing but prostitution. This exhibits that trauma is not just a commemoration of violence but also a question of survival. It is also one of the consequences of violence in which the most interior aspects of life gets most intruded upon, and fleeing to another alien space leads to a division of the self and the world according to a logic that makes the self radically fugitive and the world radically fragmented (Das, 1991). The combination of physical abuse and physical dislocation means that not only the body but the position of the body in the world has now become a site of trauma (Kabir, 2005).

Political scientists today emphasize the importance of states being embedded in society in determining their capacity to implement policy agendas (Evans, 1995). State capacity is not just a function of autonomy from societal influences; state capacity is significantly enhanced when an autonomous state is embedded in society through networks connecting state and society. Yet neither the state governments nor the central government ever tries to link the expectations of the common people with their conflict resolution agendas. Hence, the efforts for resolution of conflict, often projected as peacebuilding, in the northeast hardly brings peace. All these writers bring to the book the gap between the agendas and their

implementation by drawing out the ignorance of the common mass about such provisions. They constantly try to highlight the lack of commitment and inability of the policies to address the grassroots condition. Literary texts, being wider in scope and appeal, are more comprehensible in terms of language and narrative style and more emotive and humane in effect, can expose the loopholes, and can go for introspective analysis on such traditional strategies. They try to prove how resolution methods of conflict in the northeast are nothing but ‘...*manipulative search for an agreement that is satisfactory not merely to the adversaries, but also the third party and latent interests they represent... Commitment to social change and reform –mediation as a social movement-has been abandoned in favor of the search for atomized processes seeking agreements that provide superficial solutions to individual problems confronted in isolation*’ (Mitchell-2002). The resolution process Assam movement² seems to be infested with this limitation. Assam Accord is undoubtedly a calculative exercise for the central position as well as for a small group of the movement leaders who just yearned for political power. For example the leaders of *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP), pushed their demand for making “SONAR ASSAM” (Golden Assam) and deporting illegal migrants to take a backseat when they won the election and formed government in Assam in 1985. To deal with the troubled northeast region, India has a counter-insurgency strategy, an economic development strategy, and even a vacuous nation building-strategy. What it sorely lacks is a thoughtful state-building strategy-one that could link state and society in a way that harmonizes the interests, cultural values, and aspirations of the region with the agendas of the national state (Baruah, 2002).

MEMORIES AND FORGETFULNESS

Memories play a pivotal role in the reconstruction of past events and stories. They are paramount in the sense that they represent a broken mirror that exhibits a distorted and fractured reality (Khoury, 1980). The selected northeastern literary writers have tried to retrieve the memories of violent events through their work. The poetry and fictional works of

these writers exhibit the sincere desire to portray the injury faced by the victims of social violence, especially women and children. It can be seen that these women writers are focusing more on the traumatic effects of violence retrieved from the memories of victims, rather than discussing the actual course of violent events. The women victim characters of the violence mentioned in poetry and fictional works of the writers represent the unique multi-cultural dimensions of the Assamese society. It is this quality that enables society to cope up with all kinds of social tension. The memories of the violent conflicts are recounted by the victims long after the harrowing events get safely buried in history and no longer accessible to the present. The delayed representation of the traumatic experiences allows the memory to pick and choose what it desires to remember than recount every experience as it happened in the past, is one of the characteristic features of all representations of violent events (Misra, 2010).

People usually forget the source of the trauma yet they remember it through literary means like poems, songs, plays, novels, stories, etc. Though the memory plays a very pivotal role in historical accounts too yet, it is the literature wherein the memory along with its all beautiful possibilities, forms the fulcrum of all the 'truth' that it may represent. Literature helps in recalling past traumatic experiences though, more often in a masked form. This is one of the main reasons why literary discourses rather than historical narratives are a comparatively more creative and effective mode of portraying conflicts. Further, it is also vital to consider the idea of "post-memory", which portrays the perspectives of those who grow up influenced by memories that preceded their birth, whose own long overdue accounts are displaced by the accounts of the previous generation, formed by painful incidents that they cannot comprehend or create. (Hirsch, 2004). The literary texts play a crucial role in recalling and understanding a particular conflict through the wounded psyche which no historical or any other narratives can reach as effectively. While the deconstructionist tries to demolish all the theories that had credited literature with some amount of 'truth', the recent theorists of trauma maintain that it is perhaps due to this uncertain nature of literary discourses that the literature is capable of transporting us the wounded psyche of people from violent hit

regions, which no historical narrative can reach effectively (Luckhurst, 2006).

However, no discussion of memory would be complete without forgetfulness (Douglas, 2003). By its definition, traumatic events defy linear time by interrupting and dealing with hallucinations and other psychological disorders (Mostafa, 2009). The persistent struggle between memory and amnesia is beautifully explained by Krishna Sobti's when she recalls, "I wrote my novel *Zindaginama* (A Life Chronicle), thirty years after the Partition on India, even though I had made the first draft in 1952. Time is strange chemistry. First, we wanted to forget and then we wanted to relive the time that was!" (Sobti, 1979).

INSECURE' SECURITY

Ratna Bharali Talukdar, in her *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo*, narrates the tragic story of the brutal rape of irreprehensible Bodo tribal girls of Bhumka village by the security personnel of the Indian army. Instead of taking any steps for granting them equity, the Bodo movement bellwethers unblushingly utilized the incident to establish the nascent movement in the national scenario. Military forces deployed for the security of the common people of the region turn out to be the major reason for insecurity and harassment for them. Yet, as in other moments of collective violence, the trauma and the body were most evidently linked to the systemic abuse of women. Women were raped and mutilated during the conflict in northeast India because their female bodies provided a space in which the ruthless exploits of the men were conducted.

In *The Last Song* composition by *Temsula Ao*, readers find how the women members of a family undergo fear psychosis of the militaries. The prodigiously pitiable condition of law and authoritatively mandate in these places and the manipulation of puissance and law by the security forces is what this story is all about. In *The Curfew Man*, *Ao* again portrays how the normalcy of life of the common mass was plerarily shattered due to the rivalry between the underground forces and the armies. Even the fundamental essentialities of human life were repudiated.

Of these, the night curfew was the worst for people living in towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased, even church services or social gatherings had to be concluded before the curfew hour began. There were stories about how people carrying the sick to the hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing unnecessary, and sometimes even fatal days... there were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as those of underground rebels killed in encounters with the army” (p. 230).

In some areas of Manipur, security personnel is more feared than the separatist extremists. Irom Sharmila’s poem that came of the policeman! describes a day when an inculpable rickshaw puller was ruthlessly assaulted by the policeman. The victim and the onlookers were muted by the ascendancy. She verbalizes:

*I came back with a heavy heart that day whose creation could have made
it possible
The policeman’s cane I saw that day.*

Again

*...never a sweet song of lullaby
but the wailing of mothers
their children ripped from their breast
women separated from their men
the widows’ lament of despair
drawn by hands lads clad in olive green
(Unbind me)*

The lives of the ordinary people in Manipur are interspersed between the violence of the extremists and the security forces. *Easterine Iralu*, in her *Our Story*, reminds us of the brutal rape of five Naga girls by the Indian Army on the altar of the Yankeli village church...

*Tears of a people forced
 To witness the methodical
 Desecration of their God's abode
 By the pain, the blasphemy
 Of their virgins done to death
 Upon the altars of churches
 Transformed
 by India's soldiers to altars of lust.
 (Our Story)*

Although state agencies still believe in the embedded power of traditional security, the region is unlikely to experience peace through this system. Rather than maintaining stability and peace, the forces deployed to track the law and order situation in the area turn out to be debilitating institutions for the common mass. These writers are therefore challenging the conventional method of maintaining peace by militarized security.

Rape and other forms of physical assault on irreprehensible women, categorically in the tribal areas of the states make the entire arrangements of peace a farce. Northeast has enough instances where the women have been threatened, their mobility has been curtailed and women are utilized as a human shield by the army. There are countless allegations of custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, arbitrary checks, arbitrary apprehend, abducting, coercive interrogation, torture, extrajudicial killings dissimulated as armed exchanges (“encounter killings”) with combatants. *Arupa Patangia* in her *Arunimar Swadesh* visualizes how the Assamese society had to face a phase of parallel violence- the violence of the extremist groups and violence of the army and military. No state of emergency or emergency law can supersede the fundamental right to life. But human rights often projected to be the key element of the fight against terrorism is what breached in the most astronomically immense number by the security forces in the north-eastern states.

The psychological distance between the security forces and the mundane people marginally consummate the conditions of collaboration and inclusion, the rudimentary essentialities of peacebuilding. Protracted or belligerent conflict leave behind not only physical ravagement and insti-

tutional disarray, but withal a torn gregarious fabric characterized by mistrust, apprehension, and massive difficulties in even imagining the possibility of collaborating towards mundane goals. In such a situation, forces deployed with a promise to assure peace should be able to win the faith of the common mass. But, in the northeast, the security forces have turned to be a symbol of trepidation and trauma, remotely of a phobia for the laymen. In such a situation, the securitization of peace becomes insecure. Through their poignant tales of vexation, resentment, and psychosis, north-eastern writers appeal to the world to opt for the holistic approach of a solution to the conflicting issues for this region. Along with the exposure of the failure of militarized security, these writers also take a look into the aspects of human security, especially on the provision of the health security of this hostile region. Due to protracted ruthless violence, thousands of people have to reside in the refugee camps-make shift arrangements for the displaced victims of ethnic conflict. Neither the governments have any planned policy for rehabilitation and resettlement nor do they arrange medical facilities. In *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo* we find how an *Adivasi* (Tribal) woman gave birth to her child inside the camp, without the slightest medical facility. In front of the protagonist's eye, she ferociously keeps screaming for medical avail but there was no ambulance for her, nor was there a single nurse. The last shelter was *jangli ousudh* (traditional medicine made out of wild plants). Whether it is a case of malaria, diarrhea, or pregnancy, residents of the camp have to depend only upon such local medicines which often leads to death (p. 87). The horrible description of the refugee camps in *Felanee* laughs at the scholastic jargon over human security, "*The pit latrines in the camps had also disappeared. People started to use the open areas to defecate and a horrible stink pervaded the whole place. White worms covered this filth. It became even worse once the rains came*" (p. 43). The poor state of sanitation and hygiene arrangement is a big issue for the displaced persons. There is a lack of infrastructure, adequate facilities, health personnel, and most of the Centre's much-hyped health schemes remain just on paper with few being able to access these.

Cathy Caruth has identified parallels between traumatic suffering and its past and advocates for the need to identify traumatic narratives within unique cultural and historical frameworks (Caruth, 1996, pp. 3–9). Dis-

course on the conflict of Northeast India centers around the issue of Identity. Almost all the separatist or ethnic conflicts of this multicultural society are rooted in the issue of an assertion of the identity of varied ethnic groups. Issues of relative deprivation, inequality in the distribution of resources, cultural divisiveness instigate the need to rethink identity- to think more about “I”, “We” and “They”. In this process of identity formation, culture and collective consciousness play an important role to bring out how someone is different from another and also how it can be asserted visibly. But, in most cases, identity is found to be misused in a bitter way leading to escalated violence. While practicing the process of ‘othering’ (objectification of another person or group or creating them as other, most frequently inferior), individuals or groups often opt for annoying tactics of stereotyping, indifference and abuse, aggressive nationalism, misinterpretation of culture, and most frequently the use of physical violence. Though identity has been a focal issue of contemporary academics, they delimit their discussion over the relation between identity and social movement, the process of identity formation, or cultural dimensions over identity. But only a handful of the intellectuals have raised questions on the legitimization of violence for asserting one’s identity. While the north-eastern region has undergone the atrocities of the state-sponsored security forces, in house rivalries among the so-called sub nationalist forces also lead to innumerable sufferings. *Easterine Kire’s* works reflect the unpleasant realities of life in Nagaland by highlighting the in-house rivalry and ideological differences that existed among the Naga brethren who fought for freedom. *A Naga Village to be remembered* is a bold statement on the misuse of power by the nationalist forces in the name of patriotism and liberty. In *Felanee* also the novelist is seen questioning the unjust tendency of comparing one’s identity as inferior or superior to others. Through *Felanee*-the protagonist, the novelist repeatedly warns against the precarious tendency of social comparison of one’s identity. What is significant to be noted is that while identities differ, they cannot be categorized as inferior or superior. But this simple fact is not recognized in most cases and that is the reason why identities often become a source of conflict. There is a related issue that should be taken care of. The tendency to call up one identity as the master identity, be it the class, citizenship, race, or

religion, and to treat other identities as secondary is a common and constant problem. Identity constructed on the passionate ground is futile and leads nothing but to anxiety.

‘Why hasn’t she been given any treatment... She held up Felanee’s wrist with the white shell bangles, traditionally worn by married Bengali women, and asked “Is this the reason for neglecting her?” Another boy in a white coat flung angry words at her, “Why do you have such a soft spot for these people?” “Because they are human beings,” she retorted’ (p. 31).

Manipulated utilization of culture is a growing hazard in the identity discourse. Collectives generally opt for cultural elements to legitimize their injunctive authorization. An objective condition of socioeconomic deprivation leads the collective to pick up a visible, immediate, and efficacious cultural element to promulgate their incipient demands and aspirations. Identity politics engenders “new convivial forms of movement,” collective initiatives that are self-reflexive and sharply fixated on the expressive actions of collective members (Melucci, 1995). Though culture, by virtue of being an aesthetic treasure-house, is a legitimized epitome of identity, be it individual or collective, one often desecrates (misusing!) cultural orientation for emotional support for an identity issue. Inscriptions from this region are very much concerned about this erroneous handling of culture or cultural elements. Felanee was not treated in the hospital just because she wore some bangles, generally worn by the Bengalis, which was gifted by her beloved neighbor. Despite of her reiterated refusal to go for a traditional outfit, *Bulen* (another major character in Felanee) insisted her to wear only *Dakhana* – the traditional Bodo female outfit.

“Try to understand Kurmani. You have Bodo blood in you, that is why I am telling you all this. Wear your dress or else you will be finished. You will end up in ashes too – I tell you” (p. 180).

The writings of northeast Indian writers exhibit this *lieu de mémoire*. A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-

material in nature, which, because of human will or the function of time, has become a symbolic feature in any culture (Nora, 1996). Wearing their traditional outfit was made compulsory during the hostile days of Bodo-land movement³ or the “Robin hood” governance of ULFA⁴ (United Liberation Front of Assam) in Assam. Ironically, women have been the basic targets of punishment for its violation!

Underlining the futile rush over nationalism, *Temsula Ao* bluntly dismisses the truculent ways to ascertain identity as it leads nothing but to affliction. In her preface to *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, the inditer pellucidly verbalizes how in conflict, there are only sufferings – “*On the contrary, what the stories are endeavoring to verbally express is that in such conflicts, there are no victors, only victims, and the results can be quantified only in human terms*”. The lack of objectivity in the projection of identity discourse, the overemphasized sentimentality, and the calculative efforts to efface the history of harmony and tranquillity perturb the writers. Identity without humanity is what makes the writers doleful.

*What made you a killer?
 Why rob someone of his vehicle
 What gain you by torturing an effigy?
 For a scrap of land, you cannot take with you
 Why fight like a brute
 Is this your calling, my child?
 A mother’s heart to shatter.
 (Mother be ragged no more)*

These writers are withal conscious of the arduousness of opting for a particular identity in multicultural demography like Northeast India. While people relish tranquillity by asserting and enjoying their identity, the process often becomes belligerent in a multicultural ethnic setting due to the messy flexibility of alternatives. The narratives of these women writers additionally invoke the theory of “*intergenerational trauma*” which suggests that past trauma and pain move between generations. Such experience transmits primarily through the family (Hoffman, 2004; Dan-

ieli, 1998). This intergenerational trauma is additionally reflected in the adoption of silence as an implement of resistance against oppression. Thus the narratives of these women writer's not only offering insight into the past but withal provide scope to live forward with hope.

WOMEN AND PEACE

Being the victims, survivors, and even wagers of armed conflict, women are one of the major stakeholders in the resolution of conflict and the course that is set for future development (United Nations Development Funds for Women, 2005). There is a growing body of feminist discourse establishing that war and peace are gendered activities and women's experiences, replications, and needs should be taken earnestly while discussing issues of peace. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once verbalized, "*In war-torn societies, women often keep societies going. They maintain the social fabric. They replace destroyed social services and tend to the sick and wounded. As a result, women are the prime advocates of peace*" (Byrne, 2020). But these "prime advocates of peace" are scarcely offered a portion into the decision-making process of peacebuilding though they are the worst victims in the conflict days. Unlike their male counterparts, women are more vulnerably susceptible to atrocities ranging from sexual exploitation to psychological trauma. Studies making visible the centrality of women's agency in sundry stages of a conflict or post-conflict situation and the desideratum to have women's participation at the peace table are often ignored in the traditional academic discourses. However, the culled northeast Indian writers have endeavored their best to highlight this issue in different ways. Sometimes they endeavor it by revealing the sufferings of women while sometimes they just verbalize it live and loud.

A child snatched away from the mother's bosom

The lamentation of a mother

A woman separated from her husband

The cry of anguish of a widow

A cry springing out of a sepoy's hand.

While women have to undergo all types of violence during the conflict days, they are facilely pushed to the periphery in the time of a peace

accord. There is a broad apperception among humanitarian and mitigation agencies that women bear the brunt of armed conflict. Women will not receive their fair quota until an extensive plan cognate to gender-sensitive assuagement, rehabilitation, and reconstruction is devised exclusively for them. However, multi-layered frameworks for building peace in war-torn societies endeavors to insert gender-sensitive language but often ignored it at the grassroots level. There is the visibility of setting up gender focal points, but usually, without resources and authority to effectively leverage the system, they are set up to fail (Manchanda, 2005). Women are portrayed suffering as women, as a mother, a daughter, as a community member – they lose their properties, husbands, children, and chastity. Scars of exploitation and infelicitous gregarious stigma chase them for years. But while signing the accedences for peace, they are never recollected for a single discussion. At the non-state level, women of northeast India have been exhibiting exemplary initiatives in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. State agencies hardly care for adequate infrastructural or psychological arrangements for these female victims of conflict in the region (Choudhury, 2016). A glimpse of it could be seen in the following paragraph:

No, we don't have any emotion these days. We got some money as compensation for rape victims. That's all. Nothing more than this...leaders of the movement are now rulers. But if you ask anybody what we have got from them, all will say that we got nothing. We don't want money. But what about those culprits! Have those rapists been punished...everybody talks about justice when they visit our village...but all end in smoke. It hurts' (p. 41, Jerei Hagramaya Gabo).

Here the novelist is depicting *emotional numbing* that women of conflict zones suffer due to the result of physical or emotional pain. The author has fictionalized trauma, recollection, and identity in cognation to volatile conflicts prevailing in northeast India. The absence of counseling mechanisms for the victims of this volatile vicinity is perpetually highlighted by the writers and NGO reports. Women are recurrent victims of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to their protracted exposure to

brutality and proximity to torture. Women of the entire Northeast have experienced countless PTSD symptoms. A glimpse of it could be seen in the following paragraph:

Suddenly she got up and poured the hot water of the pot over the bright fire of the stove. The ashes hissed and flew in the air. Looking at the now-defunct fire, Pomila started crawling on the floor. She was very careful, like a child testing the ground before crawling forward as if she was surrounded on two sides by deep canals. If she was just a bit careless, she would fall inside. Crawling thus, she went to the corner of the room. Then she started rubbing her body all over, wriggling her body constantly. After some time she was tired and started huffing and puffing. Her world was now a dark black patch interspersed with pools of blood. (Mother).

These women marginally relish any counseling services, as the states do not provide any institutionalized trauma healing services. The loss that they face is not just emotional or physical but transfers into the economic and social spheres as well. Most women face a decline in social legitimacy and find themselves relegated to the fringes of society with no one to care for them or to verbalize on their behalf. Emerging concerns of trafficking and prostitution is another solemn issue of the impact of conflict upon women. Unimaginable penuriousness, lack of livelihood arrangement, inhuman condition of refugee camps, politics of compensation, outsider migration, and unreceptive convivial fabric compelled the vulnerably susceptible women to become facile prey to trafficking, prostitution, and consequently STDs. A report by Heinrich Boll Foundation on the Impact of Conflict on Women in Nagaland and Assam records, "The feminization of the AIDS epidemic is quite ostensible and the incremented susceptibility of women to HIV/AIDS in situations of conflict is an area of growing concern to gregarious and health activists (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2011). The presence of armed forces in immensely colossal numbers additionally increases the ordinant dictation for sex workers, and adolescent women are sucked into this and become pawns in a more sizably voluminous brutal network that thrives on human misery and conflict. Human and drug trafficking proliferate with women and children being sent to other

components of the country. This is withal as a result of the loss of other economic options and incremented penuriousness as a result of long-standing conflict situations and their aftermath” (Bearing Witness, 2011). *Bitter Womanhood, Felanee, Jerei Hagramaya Gabo, Khongji Makhol, Fragrance of Peace, Dawn, Ghar Ghar Kheliba aha, A Naga village to be remembered or Laburnum for my head* narrate naked realities of women in conflict and post-conflict situation and how situations compel them to opt for professions they never thought about. The literature of these north-eastern Indian writers vividly resonates with the representation of male norms and male behavior to represent human norms. As Skelsbaek observes, “our concept of security also is a gendered one because it focuses on the military aspects of conflict and not on the experiences of all citizens, particularly women” (Skelsbaek and Smith, 20011). According to this concept, this conception of ‘security’ is consummated when weapons have been laid down and, for example, a peace agreement has been signed (negative security: lack of violence). But, it does not take into account the fact that ending armed conflict does not automatically bring a terminus to a culture of violence and does not automatically engender a culture of (positive) peace (Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Amidst all atrocities and lamentation, the majority aspires to peace or conflict transformation. Efforts for peace rudimentarily aim at averting the resumption or escalation of truculent conflict in conflict-prone societies and establishing a durable and self-sustaining peace; addressing the underlying sources of conflict, building or reconstituting tranquil gregarious institutions and values, including reverence for human rights, building or reconstituting institutions of governance and the rule of law. Resolution of any conflict and measures of sustainable peace, in the academic term, need a wider initiative of objective examination of the root causes of belligerent conflict, the rectification of the mistakes committed, and fortifying convivial capital to reconstitute a broken society (Galtung, 1996). Despite passing through a belligerent history of enmity, distrust,

frangibility, and bloodshed a simultaneous effort for peace in northeast India is additionally going on. Peace itself is an inclusive term grounded on the fundamental principles of participation, democracy, dialogue, transparency, human rights, etc. hence, efforts for peace should withal be fortified with all these conceptions. The people must invest in reconstituting the gregarious base and earnestly reinforcing the civil society for resolving conflicts and building peace. The region's embedded social vigor of community cohesiveness and traditional & constitutional systems of local governance must be tapped for convivial transformation as the literary texts often indirectly denote in the region. Writings from northeast India are products of conflict. Once kenneled for its natural comeliness and cultural heritage, the northeast part of India gradually turned out to be "other territory" always famous for erroneous reasons. It consequently leads to the "exoticization" of the region's literature as a stereotyped representation of violence. But in authenticity, unlike the slogan initiatives of the state-sponsored peacebuilders, writers of the region are representing conflict in its genuine status and promoting peace more humanely. They examine the crucial issues objectively and admonish not to reiterate the mistakes, rather learn from them. The critical detachment from their creations helps the writers to inspect the authenticity of the conflict of the region and then to suggest the most efficacious way for peace. Instead of exhorting or recommending a rigid framework for achieving peace, these writers appeal to the readers to scrutinize the critical issues first and then only to adopt a viable mechanism. And that is precisely the comeliness in their uniqueness of promoting peace through their literary texts. To conclude in the words of Arupa P. Kalita, one of the prolific writers of the region,

Peace!

Peace!

The poet in me has resolved

To achieve the impossible

Ballpoints and five fingers

Now guide a goodwill mission

Across all the paper bound territories.

Notes

1. As per the Assam Accord of 1985, all the foreigners who had entered Assam before March 25, 1971, would be accepted as a citizen of India but the rest would be expelled. Religion was not the basis for consideration for citizenship. This Accord got diluted by the Citizenship Amendment Act-2019 which shifts the cut-off date to December 2014. This new act provides for granting Indian citizenship to the illegal migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian religious minorities, who had fled persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before December 2014.

2. Assam movement which lasted for eight years (1979-85) has been a landmark event for the Northeastern state of Assam, India in all aspects. It was a movement led by a group of young leaders with the demand for identification and deportation of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh along with the issues of an identity crisis, economic exploitation, socio-political safeguards, cultural threats, etc.

3. Bodoland Movement was launched during the 1980s under the patronage of the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) to carve a separate homeland namely "Bodoland" from the parent state of Assam. Bodos are one of the major plain tribes of Assam who had a demand for a separate state. Bodo militant outfits like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB which is disbanded now) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) played a major role in this movement. The movement witnessed violent activities like fratricidal killings, bomb blasts, kidnapping, rail blockades, and activities of sabotage affecting India and the neighboring states like Bhutan & Bangladesh.

4. United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is a banned terrorist organization of Assam, India.

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