

Troubled Periphery and Beyond: Interpreting Marginalities in the Select Fictions from Northeast India

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Abstract

Northeast India has endured armed conflict for many decades. The complexities of insurgency and counter-insurgency strategies have left deep scars on the region over the years. People from all walks of life have been impacted by this continuous ethnic strife, which nearly terrified everyone. The insurgency groups that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century demanded separate recognition with a safeguard to their ethnic identities. Meanwhile, the Centre in dealing with the issues of the Northeast adopted brutal measures to resolve the insurgency issues. Consequently, the people of the Northeast were pushed to a peripheral position through violence and other oppressive measures. The select fictions from Northeast India delineate the inhuman experiences of insurgencies that occurred in the forms of armed violence and oppression. Furthermore, the people of the Northeast remained socially and economically disconnected from other parts of the country after independence. When the people of the Northeast began to explore other parts of the country, they had to encounter various social and racial segregations. This paper mainly aims to study the aspects of marginalisation faced by the people of Northeast India. It also seeks to highlight the phases of insurgency conflicts and its unhealthy results. Textual analysis and qualitative research methods will be employed in writing this paper.

Keywords: Marginality, Insurgency, Conflicts, Militarization, Women, Northeast.

Marginality generally refers to the state of being pushed to the periphery of society, where particular individuals or communities experience exclusion, having limited opportunities, and socially and politically underprivileged. “Marginality is a widely used concept in the literature on inequality and development. It has gained momentum, especially in the context of rising inequality in the post-liberalised and globalised world” (Varghese and Kumar, 1). To understand the theory of marginality, a broader intellectual work across postcolonial theory, feminism, and subaltern studies that is deep rooted with it is need to be studied as well. Robert Park's essay *Human Migration: Marginal Man*, which discusses the psychological and sociological aspects of people caught between opposing cultures, is where the idea of marginality first emerged. It highlights how cultural assimilation pressures that result in the fear of being kicked out of the dominant group influence the acceptance of hegemonic norms and cause identity crises for

marginalised people. A postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, explored the concept of marginality in regarding suppressed female voices and popularised the concept of 'subaltern'. This concept of 'subaltern' was borrowed from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, meaning populations outside the hegemonic power structures economically, socially, and politically silenced or oppressed. Spivak argues that "the subaltern cannot speak" not because they literally lack voice, but because the dominant discourses distort, erase, or appropriate their voice, especially women in colonized or postcolonial societies who are doubly silenced by both imperialism and patriarchy.

In the matter regarding Indian Northeast literature the discourses of marginality are rich, complex, and deeply political. It reflects a region that has long been geographically, culturally, politically, and emotionally distanced from the Indian mainland. Writers from the Northeast engage with themes of identity, alienation, ethnicity, state violence, insurgency, ecological concerns, and cultural memory, often resisting dominant narratives imposed from the mainland India. The Northeast region consists of hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, and traditions, which differ significantly from the North Indian cultural mainstream and for decades the region has experienced insurgency militarization, and overlooked by central policies. In postcolonial India, the hill areas of the Northeast were classified as 'backward tracts', and excluded from the operation laws applicable in the rest of British-controlled India (Baruah, 36). Literature from the Northeast India often foregrounds ethnic identities not as a form of separatism, but as reclamation of erased histories, writers speak from tribal and indigenous perspectives, asserting their cultural pride against homogenizing national narratives. In *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao blends myth, memory, and resistance to give voice to the Naga experience during insurgency. Set against the backdrop of the Naga self determination movement and the militarization of the area, a poignant collection of short stories that explores the devastating impact of violence, displacement, and cultural erosion in Nagaland during the region's struggle for independence provides an intimate portrayal of the lives of ordinary people caught in extraordinary circumstances. *The Jungle Major*, a short story, offers an engaging story that may be examined from a marginalized perspective, with a special emphasis on gender, social conventions, and the human cost of war. The short story revolves around a married couple Khatila and Punaba who rebel against the social expectation of their communities.

"They were a most mis-matched couple. When their marriage was first announced in the village, people stopped in their tracks, gaped in wonder at the sheer improbability of this match and tsk, tsked, some with disbelief and some in Utter disgust at the thought" (Ao, 1).

The couple is labeled as "mismatched" by their community due to differences in appearance and background. This disparity underscores how societal norms marginalize individuals who do not fit conventional molds. Punaba an uneducated man working as a taxi driver represents the marginalized male who does not conform to societal ideals of masculinity, his dependence on Khatila for survival during the insurgency subverts traditional gender hierarchies. Khatila on the other hand challenges traditional gender roles by displaying remarkable courage and resourcefulness during Punaba's involvement in the insurgency. Her actions to save him from soldiers disguising him as a servant highlight her agency in a patriarchal society that often

relegates women to passive roles. Her calm demeanor contrasts with the stereotypical image of a submissive, anxious wife.

“It was not long before the entire land was engulfed in the flames of conflict between the rebels and the government forces. The oppressive measures adopted by the army to quell the rebellion backfired and even those villages, which were till now directly involved in the conflict, became more sympathetic towards the underground forces when they heard of the atrocities committed by the armed forces on innocent villagers” (Ao, 4).

The catastrophic effects of the Naga insurgency on everyday life are depicted in the story. Punaba's transformation into the "Jungle Major", a rebel leader is emblematic of how war forces individuals into roles they would not have chosen otherwise. His youth and innocence are consumed by violence and survival and Khatila's efforts to protect her husband reflect the emotional toll of living in a conflict zone, where personal relationships are constantly under threat, her actions also symbolizes the resilience of marginalised individuals who navigate systemic violence with ingenuity and strength. Temsula Ao's work stands out for its ability to intertwine personal stories with larger socio-political issues, her writing challenges stereotypes about Northeast India by focusing on human experiences rather than abstract political narratives. Through her evocative prose, Ao captures the essence of life in Nagaland, a land scarred by bloodshed yet resilient in its quest for identity and peace.

Ao uses storytelling as a medium to reclaim Naga identity and history and her narratives blend myths, oral traditions, and personal experiences to humanize the conflict zone, moving beyond depictions of Nagaland as only a violent place. By revisiting ancestral voices and cultural heritage, Ao seeks to restore dignity and unity among the fractured Naga communities. *The Last Song* is another short story from her collection that reflects the brutal realities faced by women during the conflict in Nagaland, highlighting their marginalisation from multiple perspectives. The story focuses on Apenyo, a young girl, and her mother Libeni, who endure unspeakable violence at the hands of government soldiers. Apenyo's act of singing during the chaos is portrayed as an act of defiance against systemic violence. Her song becomes a metaphor for resilience and agency, challenging her marginalisation as a victim.

“Some members of the choir left their singing and were seen trying to run away to safety. Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her” (Ao, 27).

Apenyo's rape and murder serve as a fictional representation of how militarized conflict destroys not only lives but also cultural innocence and heritage. The act of singing becomes a central metaphor for resistance and identity. Despite being silenced by brutal violence, her song symbolizes the enduring spirit of the Naga people amidst oppression. Temsula Ao blends narrative with fiction to craft a tale that is both deeply personal and politically charged and portrays that women like Apenyo are targeted not only because they are vulnerable but also because their violation serves as a symbolic act of domination over their community. The destruction of Apenyo's voice metaphorically represents the erasure of Naga cultural identity

under militarized oppression. Referring to the everyday social and political issues of Nagaland Easterine Iralu mentions that, “We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalized simply because I am a Naga, twice marginalised because I am a woman and thrice-marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community” (Misra, 273). Marginality via oppression can be seen across various disciplines, including sociology and political science that explains the conditions of individuals and communities living in peripheral societal corners.

On the other hand, examining Yumlembam Ibomcha's short story *Nightmare* from a marginality perspective provides a deep understanding of the ways in which identity, terror, psychological trauma, and state brutality interact in day to day living in the conflict zone of Manipur. The story in itself powerfully captures the haunting effects of militarization and social alienation on the human psyche. It highlights the plight of a peasant who is suspected of having underground ties to insurgents and the widespread fear among civilians that even innocent people can be kidnapped or killed without warning. It also highlights how marginalized people are caught in the crossfire between state forces and insurgent groups.

Very often, chaotic situations erupted suddenly and people ran haywire deserting the Khwairamband Market. There was no end to searching and arresting after entering each and every house ... what was the fault of fifty year old Chaoba, a simple cultivator? No one in his family knew his whereabouts after his arrest (Misra, 177).

Civilians in *Nightmare* are marginalised not only by state forces but also by insurgent groups. They cannot refuse shelter to insurgents for fear of retaliation, yet reporting them to authorities lead to harassment or worse, which leaves them isolated and powerless as a result of this twofold persecution. In the context of Northeast Sanjib Baruah mentions, “Counter-insurgency operations in contemporary Assam include public execution of suspected rebels by Indian soldiers often in front of villagers and sometimes even in front of their family members....As if the audiences were made to watch the re-emergence of arcane and violent forms of sovereignty....” (Baruah, xii). Ibomcha adopts a narrative style that bears witness to the atrocities without sensationalizing them, by focusing on individual experiences like those of the peasant, he amplifies marginalised voices and humanizes their struggles. The peasant's status as a farmer further highlights his marginalisation. Farmers and rural workers often bear the brunt of violence in conflict zones due to their lack of resources and political influence. Through its vivid depiction of violence and alienation, the story sheds light on the marginalisation experienced by civilians in conflict zones of Manipur. Ibomcha's storytelling further blends personal tragedy with broader socio-political commentary, emphasizing themes such as systemic oppression, psychological trauma, and social isolation.

The systematic devaluation, neglect, or suppression of certain languages in favor of more dominant ones in the context of Northeast India can be interpreted as marginalisation of language. Indigenous languages are underrepresented or entirely absent from national and literary platforms and writers are pressured to write in English or dominant Indian languages to gain visibility. Northeast India is home to hundreds of native languages and dialects, making it one of the most linguistically varied areas in the nation. However, this rich linguistic landscape is

rarely acknowledged or supported in national literary and educational policies, resulting the literature from Northeast India being excluded from mainstream Indian literary canons. Writers from the region struggle for visibility in national platforms dominated by narratives in Hindi, English or other major Indian languages resulting many works written in indigenous languages remain untranslated or poorly translated into English or other widely spoken languages that limits literary reach and perpetuates cultural invisibility.

Aruni Kashyap's short story *Skylark Girl* from his collection of short stories *His Father's Disease* provides a profound commentary on language marginalisation, particularly in the context of Northeast Indian literature. Through the experiences of Sanjib, an Assamese writer attending a literary conference in Delhi, Kashyap explores how linguistic hierarchies and cultural biases marginalise voices from the region. Kikon mentions in the research article entitled, *Dirty Food: Racism and Casteism in India*, that "My quest to explore the roots of the constant harassment and violence that migrants from Northeast India face led me to attend to encounters of Dalit experiences" (Kikon, 1-2). Through his short story Kashyap highlights the tensions between writing in English for broader recognition and staying rooted in Assamese literary traditions.

To confirm his participation, he had to email them a draft of one of his stories, translated into English And now, here he was, sitting on a concrete bench at midnight, practicing to read a whole story in a language in which he had never spoken a full sentence (Kashyap, 3).

Sanjib has to rely on an English translation of his Assamese story to participate in the conference. By emphasizing English as the medium of recognition, Kashyap criticizes how translation might unintentionally perpetuate linguistic domination. He draws attention to the fact that, while translation makes regional literature more accessible to a wider audience, it simultaneously lessens its authenticity and subtleties. The attendees also expect Sanjib to write about insurgency and violence related topics stereotypically associated with Assam rather than his reimagining of the folk fable of Tejimola. This reflects how mainstream literary spaces often reduce Northeast Indian literature to sensationalist themes, marginalising its broader cultural and creative scope. In the book *Identity and Marginality in Northeast India*, Thanggoulen Kipgen quotes that, "People from the Northeast have always faced various forms of discrimination in 'mainland' India due to differences in terms of their physical features, food habits, lifestyles, and so on (Kikon 2015; McDuie-Ra 2012a; Sitlhou and Punathil 2017; Wouters and Subba 2013), which can be traced back to colonial times" (150). In the story, Delhi is portrayed as a stepmother that treats Assam poorly which could be interpreted as a metaphor for how mainland India marginalises Northeast Indian culture and languages. This imagery underscores the alienation experienced by writers like Sanjib in national literary spaces.

Literature from Northeast India is often homogenized under the label of "Northeast" erasing its diverse ethnicities and languages as dominant narratives reduce complex identities to stereotypes while silencing subaltern perspectives. Women in Northeast literature face dual silencing by mainstream Indian discourses and patriarchal norms within their communities. Women such as Apenyo in Temsula Ao's *The Last Song* are examples of intersectional subalternity and their bodies become sites of militarized violence, reflecting how caste, gender,

and ethnicity intersect in conflict zones. Similarly *Skylark Girl* is a powerful exploration of language marginalisation faced by Northeast Indian writers. Through Sanjib's experiences, Aruni Kashyap sheds light on how linguistic hierarchies, cultural stereotyping, and translation challenges marginalize regional voices while emphasizing resistance through storytelling. Each story reveals a tapestry of marginalisation shaped by ethnicity, gender, and region. Female voices, in particular, navigate compounded oppression but also embody resilience through storytelling. By centering these narratives, the region's literature challenges homogenizing discourses and asserts the necessity of decolonized, intersectional frameworks to understand marginalisation.

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