Chapter Three

Women’s Writing in the North-East of India

3.1 Introduction

Writings from the region embody layers of complexities as the region is an amalgamation of multiethnic and multilingual cultures confined within a space that remains isolated from the rest of India largely due to its geographical location. Being a very diverse region of India with the presence of many cultures, ethnicities, traditions, customs and languages, the region has been fraught with conflicts and violence witnessing many separatist movements since the formation of the states that make up the region.

Contemporary North-East writers today include all these concerns in their fiction, short stories, poetry and prose and in a way perform as social activists by talking about these issues that pertinently seeks solutions and answers. Writers from the North-East have served the purpose of giving a voice to silenced experiences that otherwise would not be heard. Specifically looking at women writers from the region, the literature produced by women from the region also encompasses all these concerns and considerations that have been previously mentioned that are unique to the North-East. However, women’s writing from the North-East one could say carries even a heavier burden and produces more complex alternative meanings in its textual readings as it comes from a place of subjective existence and perspectives of women who are writing from within patriarchal structures, something which male writers are not burdened with.

Gendered experiences colour the writings of women irrespective of where the community, tribe, race, country or place that it originates from and this holds true even for women writers of the North-East. The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of women’s writing and the
concerns that arise in their writings. It connects the ideas of feminism as a movement which has shown its influence on women’s writing in the region and explores the beginnings of a feminist consciousness that is emerging in their writings. It also establishes that through the prism of feminist criticism, the feminist consciousness that is presented in their writings can be investigated, studied and analyzed.

3.2 The Socio-Cultural Situation of the North-East

The history of the North-Eastern region of India is one of marginalization and silenced narratives. History has a tendency to be biased in documenting the victories, conquests, achievements and narratives of the powerful and ignoring the minority. This adage is potently true in the case of the North-East. When they appear in history and in the chronicles of the first anthropologists and administrators in the region, there is an inclination to homogenize its people and myriad cultures as one. Indian historians are guilty of the same. Even today, the region is seen and represented as residing on the periphery or the margins, dislocated from the wider body of the country. And in doing so, the entire region and its people become divorced from the larger picture that make up the history of India becoming the “marginalized” and the women the “double marginalized” (Ashcroft et al. 249-50). The history of women from the region is difficult to trace because as in all patriarchal societies, the woman is only seen, heard and discussed in relation to the man. The linear representation of the region’s history with its selective subjects denies the woman any representation except in relation to the man (Yano and Pande 67).

There has been a perpetuation of a notion from an outsider’s viewpoint that women in the region enjoy a higher status, quality of life, and mobility when compared to their counterparts in the rest of the country. This may be true on a superficial level as there is an absence of rigid caste system, dowry and the Purdah system but there is a lack of awareness that women
in the North-Eastern region are oppressed by binding customary and traditional practices (Buongpui 73). Monica Banerjee in “Conflicts and Constructive Work” writes that the “visible equality in gender” especially in the public sphere is something that is often highlighted in context to the North-East when talking about the status of women, but she also agrees that:

There is some myth and romanticism surrounding the issue of liberated cultures and options of choices available to women from diverse tribes or plains (non-tribal) societies. Scholars and practitioners from the region now argue that in the name of preserving traditional customs and tribal identities, very often, individual and gender choices get foreclosed. (219-20; my emphasis)

Also, with the region’s amalgamation of multiple ethnicities and religions, the practices of discrimination vary depending on the community, tribe, faith and ethnic background that a woman comes from.

In tribal societies of the North-East, tribal and clan identity is fiercely guarded and it comes before individual identity. Customary and traditional practices are strictly observed and preserved at all costs and as such since these practices are patriarchal in its motivations; it affects the welfare and undermines the status of women in tribal societies.

A glance at the oral traditions, folktales and sayings of the many tribes displays some of the negative connotations that are attached to the woman. She is associated with social taboos, with fables that serve as warnings for the wayward, and she is often portrayed as a damsel in distress. Qualities like meekness, docility, and submissiveness are glorified and idealized. Concerning taboos for instance, men are forbidden during certain occasions or during auspicious events to have contact with women as it is believed to bring bad luck and
misfortune. For example, in some certain Naga tribes, men are forbidden to cohabit with the women before, during and after a raid (Jacobs et al. 131); the Zemei Naga men are forbidden to touch the meat of an animal killed by a woman as it is considered to be below the dignity of a man (Zehol 302); among the Angami Nagas, Genna (taboos or prohibitions set aside for religious rituals and ceremonies) was strictly observed and during the purification festival called Sekrenyi, on the day of the Genna, women were restricted to go to the village well to fetch water as they were considered unclean unlike the men folk (Yano and Pande 76). The traditional attitude of discrimination towards women is also reflected in the sayings and in the references to women. For instance, a traditional Mizo saying goes: “Wives and bamboo fences must be changed when they grow old” (qtd. in “Contested Fields”, Krishna 176) and women in Garo society are ridiculed with the saying that: “Just as a goat without teeth, so a woman lacks brain” (qtd. in “Gender Relations”, Boungpui 74).

The discrimination and stereotypes that affect women in tribal societies also reflects the historical role that women had to assume when men engaged in warfare and had to take up the responsibility of giving protection to the village, women were left to concentrate in the welfare of the family and the responsibility of working and harvesting the fields. This left women out of most decisions regarding community interests and religious roles which continue till today.

Another important aspect of tribal societies that should be noted is that customary laws are considered as an intrinsic part of their identity and culture. Carrying out and practicing customary laws act as powerful tools that continue to define the roles of men and women, and it influences the economic and social status of women (Buongpui 77-78). Observance of customary law means that women have no equal rights to property. Lal Dena in “Status of Mizo Women” writes that a Mizo woman is deprived of inheritance rights and share in the
property of her father unlike the male child (145). In “Benevolent Subordination,” Temsula Ao notes that in Naga society “All landed property belonged to the male. If a man has only daughters, on his death his property reverts to his male siblings and their sons (128). In Sikkim the situation is no different with ethnic women having no right to landed property (Krishna 178).

In contrast to the patriarchal societies that has been mentioned so far, much ado is made about the matrilineal system of the Khasis. The Khasi matrilineal culture practices a customary law that allows the youngest daughter to inherit the property of her parents, both ancestral and acquired, and to take the responsibility for the care of her parents in old age. However, the administration and control of the inherited is executed by the husbands, sons or mother’s brother(s) (Krishna 178; Syiem 136; Mukhim 291). Customary laws also restrict the participation of women in the decision-making process in relation to community and traditional institutions of governance. This is no exception even in a matrilineal society like the Khasis where “women’s role in decision making is minimal” (Syiem 143).

Ao observes that women are excluded from “institutions of power … by cultural traditions because most customary laws are constituted and interpreted by men alone because a woman’s opinion is not considered to be valuable enough in decision-making” (131). Since public spaces are highly gendered, the area of administration and politics is considered to be a man’s space and participation of women is restricted and even considered to be beyond her intellectual capacity. Customary laws in matters of marriage and divorce are also discriminatory towards women. Among some of the tribes, the practice of a custom called bride-price is prevalent where a man has to pay a woman’s parents the ‘price’ of taking away the contribution of an economically active member of the family and as such the woman can be inadvertently treated as a commodity (Buongpui 78). Even in divorces, women are unable
to retain the right to keep her children as customary law favours the husband’s rights (Jacobs et al. 55)

In non-hill tribe communities especially in Assam and Manipur, where the ethnic majority are followers of Hinduism, women in these communities are subjected to the same debilitating practices and customs that their counterparts face in the rest of the country.

In Assam, the culture is a synthesis of social practices and customs of diverse communities and tribes (Hazarika 18). In the Vedic period in Assam, women enjoyed privileges equal to men in education and religious ceremonies especially by upper caste Hindu women but by the medieval period, as a feudal and casteist system was adopted and this deprived women of their autonomy and social mobility and Hindu rituals and patriarchal practices become more stringent. A look into oral/folk literature also shows the certain societal rules and conduct that women had to live up to. The moral qualities of women were discussed at length and those women who were thought to be meek, passive and docile enjoyed social respect in society (Hazarika 23-29). The advent of education under the British and Baptist missionaries allowed Assamese women to make progressive steps but the education of women also triggered certain debates among the emerging intelligentsia of the time. Some prominent men questioned the propriety of women’s empowerment through education fearing it would lead them to neglecting their wifely duties and recommended that the education of girls should consist of training them to become efficient home makers (Hazarika 37).

In Manipur, Meitei women occupy a paradoxical social status. On one hand, they do occupy equal participation in the social and economic sphere as the men because Meitei women have always maintained a tradition of rebellion against oppression by organizing themselves into groups that protest against injustices. But the bitter reality is that the coming together of women to agitate against oppression in society is given the impetus by the presence of many
social evils visible in society today that affect women and impact their lives in negative ways. For example, the *Nupi-Lan* which is literally translated as ‘women’s war’ were politicized agitations initiated by women and various other women’s movements in the state display women as “figures of resistance” but looking into the domestic space, *Meitei* women are still subjected to patriarchal oppression. She is subjected to the husband’s authority and domestic violence and abuse is quite common (Devi 84). Also in Manipur, the situation is highly militarized like other places in the region and this has created a backdrop where the presence of the Indian army has become a highly controversial and contentious issue with the women suffering the direct effects of occupation, retaliations by insurgents and a politically unstable environment.

In any conflict or combat-zone, it goes without saying that women and children become the most vulnerable. The North-East as mentioned earlier is a conflict-ridden region with a high military presence and insurgency activities. The unrest and violence is an everyday part of life for the local populations and women in such situations are more vulnerable than men “with greater restrictions placed on them, their mobility, their access to health, education, livelihood, employment, even leisure” (Gill 9). Even women’s bodies become the sites of battle. The breakdown of structure there is multiplicative increase of atrocities and brutalities perpetuated on women (12). Many women especially mothers in the region have taken the initiative in organizing associations and groups that try to negotiate peace between the insurgents and the state governments and they have achieved to a certain degree to maintain the cohesiveness of community and the cessation of conflicts overturning into outright wars but the underlying reality is that as proactive as they are in peace building processes, women groups and organizations still function under the dominant power structure that are set up by men – in other words, they do not have the final say (Goswami 121).
Another important aspect when studying the socio-cultural lives of women in the North-East is the influence of Christianity and its impacts on the traditional way of life. It was with the arrival of Major Francis Jenkins, the British commissioner for the Assam province in 1832 that the American Baptist missionaries first set up camp in 1836 introducing formal education and their faith to this previously unexplored region. Their mission work swiftly spread into the hill tribe communities and the turn of the twentieth century, many communities in the region had accepted Christianity as their religion.

Women undoubtedly benefited from the education provided by the missionaries and some customs, rituals, traditions that were intrinsic to the traditional way of life and discriminatory towards women before the missionaries came were slowly abandoned. Women could finally aspire to move beyond the drudgery of household chores and fieldwork and could contribute more to social and economic matters equipped with their new found knowledge. Although women benefited from availing western education, it also reinforced the system of patriarchy. Christianity taught women to be obedient and dutiful mothers and daughters. Also women’s participation in church was still limited since she could not be ordained into ministry or perform priestly duties (Yano and Pande 87). It also failed to do away with gender disparities as it did not influence much of the dynamics of the traditional dependence of a woman on a man (92).

Taking all these factors into account, the status of women in the North-East on the outside may seem to enjoy greater mobility and freedom, but the reality is that since most communities are structured on patriarchal lines, women are still controlled by agencies of patriarchy. It is only the outsiders’ perspective and mainstream media that portrays a much romanticized image. She is also made to believe that her lot is much better off when
The North-Eastern woman is not immune to the psychological effects of trauma and violence caused by decades of unrest, and she is victimized by the effects of insurgency and occupation on the men folk who in turn subject her to sexual exploitation, to abuse, and oppression. Although by categorizing women from the region as ‘North-Eastern women’ or ‘women from the North-East’ there is the danger of generalizing them and making ineffectual the individual experiences that they as the ‘second sex’ undergo specific to the background, strata, tribes and ethnic communities they come from, the fact is that they have the common experience of being women from a certain region of the country i.e., the North-East and this can be a potentially important space where critical analytical studies can be carried out.

3.3 An Overview of Women’s Writing in the North-East

The tradition of women’s writing in English is fairly new with most writings by women taking off only after the advent of the British rule in the region and with the introduction of formal education. However, it is important to mention that there are prolific fiction writing, dramas, poems, folktales written by women in the regional tongues. For instance, Manipur has a rich culture of theatre (Brara 335). Female artists of the Shumang Leela, which are local theatre groups, perform on themes that are relevant in showing the problems that women encounter. Plays and performances with themes on domestic violence, corruption, polygamy, and army atrocities are taken up. These female artists brought attention to women issues and revolted against societal notions imposed on them through the medium (343).

Another example would be the role of journals and periodicals in Assam that encouraged women to publish poems, general articles and stories, and thus creating the confidence in
them to venture into the public sphere and voice out their voices against the various modes of oppressive forces in their lives. They wrote on matters pertaining to “education, freedom and equality of the sexes” (Hazarika 85). Journals like *Ghar Jeuti* in Assam fronted by women focused on the promotion of women’s writing and other women’s issues thus developing a literary ambience in the state (88).

An eminent literary figure that deserves an honourable mention when discussing the literary scene in the region is the fiction of Indira Goswami, a regional language writer whose works were able to transcend regional barriers. Born in 1942 in Guwahati, Assam, Goswami started writing from an early age and received quality education in Shillong. She married at a young age and had a relatively happy marriage until tragedy struck and she soon found herself as a young widow heading to Vrindavan (a town in Uttar Pradesh, India) which was the traditional destination for Hindu widows. It was a combination of these experiences that dramatically influenced the direction of her fiction in which she made bold feminist statements through the creation of her woman characters.

In most of her novels, the reader encounters women who are victims of social oppression, whose desires do not have any social sanction and consumed by the fire of unfulfilled desire, they are finally driven to self-destruction. Goswami is undoubtedly one of the rare Indian women writers who dared to portray a woman’s sexual needs as a natural right. Such a stance taken by Goswami on sexuality echoes the assertion made by the French feminist Hélène Cixous that women have been “driven away violently” both from their bodies as well as their writing because their sexual needs have always been repressed (Misra, “Brave, Gentle and Bold”). *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* is an example of Goswami’s questioning of the repression of female sexuality bears the imprint of the female consciousness. She deftly portrays women who are denied their share of *jouissance* and in doing this charted into new
territories in Assamese literature and even in Indian literature (Swami). Through her fiction, she also severely criticized Hindu customs and rituals which she felt was outdated and had simply become tools for oppressing women, and was also critical of the stifling patriarchal system that Hindu women and widows in particular were subjected to.

The contemporary women writers writing in English from the region are a group of first-generation of writers who come from better economic backgrounds that has allowed them to have solid educations that translates into points of view that is more cosmopolitan and having a heightened awareness of life outside the region as well. This and the ability to reach out to a bigger reading audience are primary reasons in their choice to write in English. There is a shared commonality in this even though the region is highly heterogeneous and creates a bond beyond political boundaries.

The rise of English fiction from the region, novels and short stories, has proliferated most notable of which is the contribution of women writers. Women writers from Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh have produced fiction prodigiously in the last decade. Mizoram has just entered into this world with a few publications whereas in Sikkim Yishey Doma is a recent entry into the arena of English fiction. Women writing fiction in English from Manipur and Tripura have yet to surface on the map although translations of works written by women have been going on for some time.

From Nagaland, Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire are two prominent writers from the state. Their works have brought much attention to the region in general and in particular Nagaland. Both of these writers are recipients of national awards and have been recognised for their contributions to literature. Some of Ao’s short fiction works are: *These Hills called Home* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head Stories* (2010). Kire’s novels include *A Naga Village*
Remembered (2003), A Terrible Matriarchy (2007), Mari (2010, and her most recent novel which won her the Hindu Literary Prize 2015, When the River Sleeps (2014).

From Meghalaya, Anjum Hasan and Daisy Hasan, who are sisters, have published novels that reveal ‘outsider’s’ perspective as they do not ethnically originate from the state. They have written on themes about xenophobia in the region, the existential angst of the youth and the treatment of North-Easterners in mainland India. Daisy Hasan has written The To-Let House (2010) and Anjum Hasan debuted with Lunatic in My Head (2007) followed by Neti Neti (2009), her short-story collection Difficult Pleasures (2012), and The Cosmopolitans (2015).

Another writer with ties to the state is Belinder Dhanoa whose works include Waiting for Winter: A Novel (1991) and Echoes in the Well (2014). There is also Bijoya Sawian’s Shadow Men (2010) which against the backdrop of communal violence in Shillong explores the issues that crop up in the matriarchal and matrilineal Khasi society. Her most recent publication has been a collection of short stories called A Family Secret and Other Stories (2014).

Two prominent literary figures in English fiction writing from Assam are Mitra Phukan and Jahnavi Barua. Phukan has written Terrorist Camp Adventure (2003), The Collector’s Wife (2005), and A Monsoon of Music (2011). Barua wrote the critically acclaimed short stories collection Next Door Stories (2008) and the novel Rebirth (2010). The backdrops of these works are the insurgency movements in the state of Assam and ecological richness that the state boasts of.

Another writer in English from the region is Mamang Dai, a former civil servant and recipient of the Padma Shri for her contribution to literature and education is from Arunachal Pradesh. She brought to the attention of the world the rich oral traditions and folklore of the Adis (one of the tribes of the state) of Arunachal with the publication of her collection of short stories The Legends of Pensam (2006). This was followed by Stupid Cupid (2009) and
The Black Hill (2014). From Mizoram, Malsawmi Jacob is a first-generation English writer whose novel Zorami (2014) deals with the insurgency movement that had affected the state in the 1960s.

There are a few mentionable young women writers who are also contributing to the literary scene of the North-East. A notable name is Janice Pariat whose debut book Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories (2012) won the Sahitya Akademi for the Young Writer Award in English language. Boats on Lands touches upon a myriad of themes that interweaves myth and reality to present difficult truths, political unrest, nostalgia, questions of identity and belonging, love and relationships, angst, sexual yearnings, mysticism, and beautiful descriptions of the landscape of Assam. Pariat is also the author of Seahorse: A Novel (2014).

Other young women writers and their works of fiction are Avinuo Kire’s The Power to Forgive and Other Stories (2015) and Suzanne Sangi’s Facebook Phantom (2013) and Jo’s Journal (2014).

The fictions of these contemporary women writers bring to life a historical account of life in their societies. They reflect the demarcated traditional roles for men and women; offers their perspectives on kinships and friendships; offers insight into ancient tribal customs; familial ties; and the conflict that has become endemic to the region. The niche that women occupy in the region is brought to life through their narratives – their sorrows, aspirations, struggles and life experiences are exposed and brought to the knowledge of the outside world. Their writings contribute to the greater arena of Indian English Literature in general and women’s writing in India in particular by offering a unique perspective of female experience from a region often shrouded in mystery.
3.4 Feminist Consciousness in the Fiction of North-East Women Writers

In the fiction of select women writers of the North-East, the beginning of a feminist consciousness is discernible. Here the word ‘feminist’ is used according to Toril Moi’s definition of referring to “writing which takes a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position,” so the term ‘feminist consciousness’ is used to refer to a state of awareness of the self and the situation of belonging to a gender and the concerns that comes along with belonging to that gender (132).

With the exception of Indira Goswami, whose novels have primarily focused on women’s issues, gender relations, and the constraints of patriarchal societies on women, there is still a dearth of contemporary women writers in English from the region who write exclusively on the ‘woman question’. The reason for this is that a literary tradition from the North-East is in its nascent stages and writers of the region are still attempting to find a footing in the literary world by exploring different themes and subject matters. However, that being said, from a feminist point of view since “writers necessarily articulate gendered experience,” all writing by women is marked by gender and it is inevitable that in the act of writing, women writers from the region raise the consciousness of women themselves and the consciousness about women and give insights into female sensibilities (Ostriker 9). The manner in which women assimilate their experiences and write about it can bring meaning to what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society. Since not all writing by women can be categorized as feminist, to label the writings of women from the North-East as ‘feminist’ in its approach is problematic and premature at this stage. Nevertheless, interpretations that reflect the feminist consciousness can emerge.

Nearly all societies across the world are patriarchal and the North-East region is no exception. In the multi-ethnic and heterogeneous populations of the region, with the
exception of the Khasi matrilineal system, most societies are strongly patriarchal and instances of discrimination and oppression against women are not difficult. Since all women regardless of the cultural complexities of the patriarchal societies that they individually inhabit belong to a gendered category regardless of their race or class or background. Their category positions them as inferior to men in the ‘hierarchy of gender’ and thus subjects them to biases, discriminations and restrictions. Since women writers from the region inhabit this gendered space in their patriarchal societies, their writings inevitably reflect their experiences as the ‘inferior’ sex. Exploitation and marginality experienced under patriarchal tyranny is observed and reflected on in their fiction.

The fiction coming out from the region, as mentioned earlier, is still in its formative state and therefore the subject of oppression and discrimination faced in patriarchal societies in women’s writings leans towards more on ‘observation’ rather than on attempting to find responses aimed at redefinitions or to dismantle the current system of male domination. Their fiction reflects a self-awareness and self-expression in observing the current situation that they find themselves in – the awareness of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

Nevertheless, such self-awareness and observation display what one can call the initial stages of developing a feminist consciousness. Through just the act of observing and articulating their experiences, these women writers carry out an important role of providing moral support for women readers by being relatable and also male readers who wish to understand the feminine mind unobstructed by predefined notions that have been constructed by patriarchal societies. They provide “the power of moral necessity to support the oppressed …” and the mere act of writing provides the power to voice out against oppression which in turn leads to “uncommon demonstrations of courage” (Waldron 3).
By beginning to articulate ideas that explore the reality of being a woman in patriarchal societies, the literary voices of North-East women writers can be read as ‘proto-feminist’ texts that will eventually contribute to a tradition of women’s writing from the region. The fact that they begin to question their situation and create awareness of the reality of being female or being a woman in their patriarchal societies reflect the proto-feminist tendencies that are emerging in their works.

The recent phenomenon of an overflow of women writers emerging from the North-East has garnered greater visibility for the women of the region and by becoming active participants in the literary culture with the rest of India is reflective of the proto-feminist stages in women’s history where the lack of representation and constrictions led to the outburst of creative and critical works by women. By the simple act of writing their experiences, women writers of the region have acquired the power to have a voice and thereby creating opportunities to speak out against the frequently silenced space of oppression that women inhabit in a man’s world (Waldron 5).

3.5 Feminist Criticism and North-East Women’s Writings:

Virginia Woolf in her essay “Women and Fiction” writes that “a woman’s book is not written as a man would write it,” emphasizing that female experience presented in women’s writing is a valid and important aspect of a woman’s reality and fundamentally different from writings by men. Taking the gynocritical approach, these women writers can be considered what Showalter in “Towards a Feminist Poetics” calls as producers of “textual meaning” who bring different textures to the larger body of what entails as female experience in the tradition of women’s writings (128).
The naming of experience as “female” and emphasizing on the gender of the writer opens up the problem of falling into stereotypes of specificities and commonalities when discussing women’s writing. Taking a gynocritical approach has its own shortcomings as it can be contradictory in searching for commonality and at the same time strive to avoid uniformity. However, a gynocritical approach can render the opportunity to give representation of women in fiction and the woman writer not as “silent” and “hidden” but to be conceived of as “heroic, passionate, subversive” (Eagleton 110). Quoting Gerda Lerner on the importance of examining women’s experience, Showalter in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” argues that “female experience” within women’s writing and women’s or female culture is an important aspect of gynocriticism and this approach is a useful tool when discussing the writings of women from the North-East. Lerner argues that women have been left out of history and that history has been considered “Only in male-centred terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women” and in order to rectify the problem, Lerner, adds that there ought to be a “woman-centered inquiry…. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women’s past” (qtd. in Showalter 339-40).

Extending on Showalter’s idea of emphasizing on female experience, the subordinated position that women occupy as a result of being the female ‘gender’ is a matter of great importance in academic discourses. It is understood that ‘sex’ is a physical differentiation between the biological male and biological female while ‘gender’ is a product and process of acculturation (Judith Butler 36). The feminist writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Judith Butler and others concentrate on this aspect of gender differences and expectations, which according to them is not biological but socially constructed by patriarchy which has
long subjugated and oppressed women. In patriarchal societies, gender roles of the sexes largely contribute to the subordinate position of women. Feminist writers and feminist criticism question this aspect of women’s subordinated position in relation to men in their writings.

This aspect of prodding an existing system of discrimination and oppression faced by women is a growing trend in writings by women that emerge from the North-East. The female experience of discrimination and oppression that is expressed through their fiction also highlights a growing consciousness to question her subjugated and subordinated position in society. The application of these important theoretical frameworks allows the nuanced reading of the subjectivity of women’s status and position in a patriarchal society that is articulated and expressed in the fiction of women writers of the region.

3.6 Conclusion

In India’s North-East, women writers have emerged as a literary force to be reckoned with. There is evidence of a growing feminist consciousness just as the women’s writings in the earlier periods went through across different continents. Some of these writings can be read as proto-feminist texts as they are the first of its kind to address feminine issues. These women writers have also addressed issues that are pertinent to the region and offer a glimpse into the lives of women in the region as heterogeneous as it may be. Feminism as a movement with its long history is still relevant today since it continues to bring empowerment to women by reinforcing the notion of equal rights and its questioning of gender discrimination especially in places like India’s North-East where even the ‘first-wave’ has not yet even begun to take shape. Using the framework of feminism and its critical theories, it is my humble attempt to do a close reading of the select primary texts and delve
into an exploration of the world of fiction written by contemporary women writers of the North-East.
Notes

1. Here I use ‘double marginalization’ at par with ‘double colonization’ (the notion that as formerly colonized societies that were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies) elucidated by Bill Ashcroft in Post Colonial Studies Reader to refer to the condition of women in the North-East for lack of a better term or framework that can be used to study their condition and experience as a group. Their heritage is one of oppression and domination by multiple power structures.

2. Ethnic tribes descended from the Mongolian racial group. Naga tribes are indigenous to Nagaland state but also are present in different states that comprise the North-East region. There are more than 40 plus distinct Naga tribes, see Jamir.

3. The ethnic inhabitants of the state of Mizoram.

4. One of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya.

5. Customary law can be defined as, “an established system of immemorial rules which evolved from the way of life and natural wants of the people, the general context of which was a common knowledge, coupled with precedents applying to special cases, which were retained in the memories of the chiefs and his counsellors, their sons and their son’s son, until forgotten, or until they become part of the immemorial rules,” (qtd. in Gender Relations, Buongpui 77) see Bekker 11.

6. In Meghalaya, all three major tribes, the Khasis, Jaintia and Garo practice the matrilineal system.

7. Meitei is an endonym given to an ethnic person of the state of Manipur. Meiteis are the major ethnic group of Manipur.
8. Proto-feminist or proto-feminism refers to the diverse texts, ideas, voices, and lives of women who articulated feminist thoughts and feminist critical thinking ahead of their times and before such categories were created to refer to that stage in women’s history. I use the term to describe the literary ‘primordial’ state that women’s writing from the North-East is currently occupying. They can be viewed as pioneers as they are on the forefront of articulating ideas on the ‘woman question’ even though they do not quite fit the category of feminist writings just yet. For a better understanding of the term and its usage see Plain 6-10.
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