Chapter Four

Violence in the Fiction of Women Writers of the North-East

4.1 Introduction

A dark feature and reality of the North-East is that the region and its people have experienced violence, the consequence of conflicts, as a natural fabric that is weaved into their existence and everyday life. The issues that activate and trigger violence resulting from conflicts in the region are complex, and ties in greatly with the ethnic diversity of its people. Many of today’s conflicts and the difficulty in finding solutions to the varied problems of the region have their origins in the way the subcontinent was partitioned and how international borders were re-organized. This was followed by the response to what was perceived as occupation after India’s independence which opened a Pandora’s box of insurgent movements, counter-insurgency responses, inter-ethnic conflicts over natural resources, native-migrant conflicts and border disputes.

The troubled political climate and the confluence of various ethnic groups have given rise to a body of writing that ‘writes’ violence as an act of witnessing, as way of preserving memories – to ‘never forget’, and as a means of personal catharsis.

The historical experiences of violence in the region vary in each of the states that comprise the North-East and their responses to the emergent issues have also been different. A major theme and subject matter that features in fiction writing in English from the region is a preoccupation with the violence that the land and its people have experienced. The states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur have particularly witnessed the emergence of writers who have been “vocal and productive in literary representations of resistance, trauma and suffering….” Writing literature that represents the violence stemming from “communal and
ethnic strife, militancy and underground movements” (Zama 66). The trauma of violence is reflected upon greatly in the literature that the region has produced and it also reveals the writer’s desire to share his/her story as part of the collective experience of his/her people with the outside world. Many of the fiction, novels and short stories, have their origins in actual historical events that the writers have witnessed, or events that have transpired and remembered in people’s collective memory. In this way, the fiction that North-East writers create and bring forth becomes an effective way of showing the reality of life in the region under the shadow of a milieu of conflicts.

Fiction is an effective genre for the writer to expose the psychological trauma that people have endured for decades and in the process it creates a powerful voice by bringing focus on the forgotten stories of people and also serves the purpose for healing to take place.

Malsawmi Jacob, poet and writer, in an interview on her book Zorami (2015) which focuses on the 1960s Mizo insurgency movement, emphasizes on the emotional wounds that people have braved through the years of unrest and violence, and states that the purpose of writing about these events in her novel is a “quest for inner healing” (Hanghal). Temsula Ao, a Naga writer, in the foreword “Lest We Forget” from her book These Hills (2006) offers her reasons for writing on the political struggle of the Nagas. For her, the purpose of writing is to “probe” how the struggle for self-determination and violence that followed has affected the psyche of people and why “the inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left by the struggle on their lives” (x-xi). Shillong poet, Kynpham S. Nongkyrih remarks that the writer from the North-East lives with “the menace of the gun” and so merely indulging in “verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics” is not enough but that it is a necessity to “master the art of witness.”
Many writers from the region see the act of writing as personal quest to examine the collective experience and traumatized psyche of the people of the land irrespective of which North-East state and the historical experience of an ethnic community or tribe they may come from. There is also a sense of moral responsibility each writer feels to record and preserve the memories of their people's history even though such sentiments may not be explicitly stated.

The chapter uses the gynocritical approach posited by Elaine Showalter to inquire into the female experience of violence presented by women writers of the North-East. The life experiences of a man are significantly different from a woman’s experiences, be it their societal roles or their social contexts and as women writers who occupy the space as the other and as the “muted”² (qtd. in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, Showalter 240-41). A woman’s experiences in discussions on violence and conflicts are often not given priority and are usually studied from an androcentric perspective, and it is for this reason that the female experience that women writers from the North-East present in their fiction is important to study. The voices that they present through the characters and the narrative styles that are used to explore the collective psyche of a people traumatized by a long history of violence all contributes to our understanding of the female experience. What is the woman writer’s perspective on the violence that has ravaged the region and what is the female experience that the woman writerportrays through her fiction? These are two pertinent questions that the chapter will attempt to address.

The chapter will concentrate on the fiction of three contemporary women writers from the region. The women writers and their select works of fiction (collection of short stories and novels) that will be studied in this chapter are These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War

4.2 Violence Presented in North-East Women’s Fiction

When we discuss violence which is presented in the fiction of North-East women writers, it is necessary to clearly define what violence is, what type or kind of violence we are referring to, what the word encapsulates and in what context the word is being used. This is crucial because the word ‘violence’ is extremely general and can refer to different types of violence depending on who is defining it and for what purpose.

The World Health Organization in their World Report on Violence and Health gives a broad definition of violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” A further classification given by the report divides violence into three categories: self-violence; interpersonal violence; and collective violence. The third typology, “collective violence” is the type of violence that is related to the present study. The report gives the definition of collective violence as:

The instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives. It takes a variety of forms: armed conflicts within or between states; genocide, repression and other human rights abuses; terrorism; and organized violent crime.

The typology also captures the nature of violent acts, which can be physical, sexual or psychological or involve deprivation or neglect … the relevance of the
setting, the relationship between the perpetrator and victim … the possible motives for the violence.

The typology of “collective violence” can be applied to the kind of violence that occurs in the North-East. “Collective violence” can then trickle down into “interpersonal violence” which is violence that is inflicted by an individual or by a small group of individuals and can include random acts of violence, rape or assault by strangers. To connect this definition with the nature of violence that is on-going in the North-East and represented in its literature, it is crucial to understand the conflicts that result in the typology that has been mentioned.

The nature of conflicts in the North-East and the discourses that it generates centers on politics, economics and culture. Virtually all the ethnic communities and groups are engaged in agitations, separatist movements, and secession struggles though the nature, form and demands of their protests may differ. M.N. Karna correctly identifies the situation in the region as being characterized by a “culture of movements.” Politically, the demands revolve around the concepts of nation, national integration and the Indian constitution and “Since the debate on nation and national identity is circumscribed by the limits of the Indian constitution,” the protests and demands for independence turn into insurgency movements and armed struggles (22).

Insurgency movements then in turn not only use violence as a means to attain their demands against the Indian State but also has its own conflicts with other separatist movements thus affecting the daily lives of people, their means of economy and their mobility. The response of the Indian State to these armed struggles is a highly militarized one, where local people in the region on suspicions of participating in the agitations are taken into custody, and are interrogated and invasive house searches are conducted, which creates feelings of deep distrust and animosity among local populations thereby fuelling the insurgency movements.
Continuation of insurgency attacks and counter attacks leads to further isolation and alienation of the region (25). Such situations of political turmoil are seen especially in the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Assam and the literature that emerges reflects the reality of living with violence.

For example, the texts which have been chosen for study reflects the historical experience and the history of the armed struggle that has been seen in a certain state and the nature of conflicts that perpetuates violence differs from state to state. In Ao’s *These Hills* and *Laburnum for My Head*, the separatist movement that began after Indian independence, Naga nationalism and its struggles against the Indian government are major themes. The response of the Indian State to these armed struggles against the indigenous population and the intensification of military operations by armed forces are also important themes. The ideas of identity and the influence of Christianity contributing to their distinctive socio-cultural identity ties in strongly with the struggle for self-determination and this subject matter is dealt with time and again in literature that comes forth from Nagaland.

Phukan’s *Collector’s Wife* reflects the complexity of the political situation in Assam. Though the state is considered to be integrated with the mainstream Indian culture and political life due to the historical presence of many “pan-Indian social and cultural movements” such as *Vaishnavism* in the sixteenth century and the participation of its people in the Indian freedom struggle, this “Indianness” in recent years has been increasingly challenged by separatist movements such as those articulated by the separatist group ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) (Karna 25). The political situation is not only restricted to the conflict between State and separatist groups but also tackled in the *Collector’s Wife* is the issue of inter-ethnic and communal conflicts that have been boiling over in the recent past with indigenous
populations increasingly actualizing their ire against the influx of migrant workers from other states in India and illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries.

In Sawian’s *Shadow Men*, another dimension of conflicts in the region escalating into violence is shown. It explores the issue of ethnic tension in Meghalaya caused by the continued influx of immigrants especially from Bangladesh and migrant workers and settlers from other states which has exacerbated the feeling of communal tension and strained peaceful co-existence. Frequent clashes between tribal and non-tribals, outsiders and insiders, even inter and intra-tribals disputes have been escalating and to achieve intended goals, different groups or communities resort to violence (Karna 26).

To represent suffering, trauma and pain caused by violence stemming from conflicts, especially suffering that is part of the collective experience and the suffering that is part of an individual’s history; the writer negotiates a thin line between fiction and non-fiction, and has to tread between impartial objectivity and their subjectivity as there is the danger of trivializing and sentimentalizing (Zama 73). It is difficult for an “insider” to depict the situation and political turmoil and maintain the necessary “artistic distance” in an impartial manner (Misra 307).

In writing ‘trauma literature’, the piecing together of memory is a feature characteristic of representations of violent events. The use of memory to construct traumatic historical events in literature becomes representative of the truth. It allows the reader to access the psyche of writer through the characters and in a way become reliable representations of the actual events. Tilottoma Misra points this out: “The literary writer mixes her own memory with those of the victims while she tries to recreate the events at the time when they were experienced. The process of sifting the memories in order to select the images which
convey a violent event most powerfully is one of the important parts of a writer’s work” (307; my emphasis).

When women articulate violence in fiction, it is to capture the survivalist spirit and will displayed by their female characters and to shed light on the effects of political violence on women who are relegated to the margins of society. Their fiction mirrors the actual lives that many women live when immersed into the politics of violence created by power structures where their representation is almost nil. But women are also not just the victimized ‘other’. They are presented as strong figures exhibiting courage and resilience in someone else’s war.

The women writer from the North-East wields the might of the pen to incorporate the memories of violence with the stories of its victims to give a platform for the realistic representation and depiction of the marginalized lives existing in conflict-zones. They depict with accuracy the prolonged effects of militancy and insurgency where women are pushed to the peripheries, and yet against all the odds, attempt to be peace-builders and diffuse hostilities.

4.3 Violence and Its Impact on Women in the North-East

The women in the North-East, like the women in the rest of the world, have experienced violation, setbacks and much suffering done in the name of modernization, governance, autonomy, dissent, rebellion, and struggle for power. To state the obvious, women in the North-East have faced violence in situations of conflict. The most obvious impact is “physical and sexual violence” and “psychological scarring” and trauma from prolonged exposure to brutalities and restrictions placed on women in patriarchal societies (Gill 10).

With their men joining the underground rebel forces or killed in encounters or raids, the economic burden of providing for the family and heading the household falls on to the
women. Not only do they have to deal with the trauma of losing a loved one as innocent bystanders in conflicts not of their creation, they also have to face the intimidations and harassment of the interrogation squads and are highly vulnerable to violent acts of rape, assault and abuse. And as civilians, they have to suffer the curtailment of their mobility and freedom during curfews and bandhs which are frequent occurrences in the region.

Another problem is the apparent contradiction of insurgent groups or undergrounds who claim to protect the interests of the most innocent and vulnerable, but in the decades of unrest and insurgency in the region, these groups have meted out abhorrent treatment on women by means of terror, intimidation, extortion and violence. Paula Banerjee has described this as the burden of “the two patriarchies of rebel and state armed forces.”

There is the constant fear of the rebel forces/insurgents on one hand and of the armed forces on the other, and this fear is a constant reality in the lives of women. Also the decline of traditional societies – the breakdown of social order and kinship patterns, has further added to the violence.

The stark reality is that a woman’s position especially in the context of the North-East in times of conflict is an extremely vulnerable one where the state, the system and the contesting groups fail to give protection. Instead, exploitation and violation of human rights become the norm. As Sanjoy Hazarika puts it: “Take any conflict or potential conflict: women are the most vulnerable and marginalized from either side” (73; my emphasis). The challenges that women experience and face in situations of conflicts where her status is one of vulnerability to high risks of violence and violations finds articulation and representation in the fiction of women writers from the region.
4.4 The Portrayal of Women and Violence in Temsula Ao’s *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*

Temsula Ao is a renowned writer from the state of Nagaland and is a major literary voice writing in English to have emerged from the region. She is a recipient of the Padmashree and Governor’s Medal, and also received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Ao is a prolific writer with five collections of poetry and two collections of short stories to her name along with a memoir *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir* which came out in 2014.

Ao’s collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (hereafter *These Hills*) and *Laburnum for My Head* (hereafter *Laburnum*) focus particularly on the state of Nagaland, the insurgency movement, and also portray the traditional and cultural lives of the tribals that inhabit the state. Nagaland’s history is not only about its struggle for sovereignty and self-determination which have triggered the many armed groups of insurgents, but was also a historically important site of an often forgotten battle of Second World War referred to as ‘The Battle of Kohima’.

The representation of violence, insurgency and unrest experienced in the tumultuous years after India gained independence is a recurring theme in Ao’s *These Hills*, while *Laburnum* focuses on different aspects of the traditional and cultural lives of the Nagas, it also explores the fear and prosecution that local populations face from armed forces and insurgents. Ao’s stories can be read as a political critique of the Indian government – specifically the presence of armed military, the disillusionment and abuse of power through violence by insurgents and the Naga patriarchal system (Tellis 38).
In critical discussions on the depiction of ‘insurgency’ and ‘violence’ in literature by Naga writers, there is a lack of attention given to female perspective and experience of violence. Select stories from Ao’s *These Hills* and *Laburnum* are taken up for discussion to highlight the effects of violence on women and to shed some light on the female experience of violence portrayed by Ao in her narratives.

The theme of violence is foregrounded by Ao in her introductory note to *These Hills*, she writes: “Many of the stories in this collection have their genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that make up the history of the Nagas from the early fifties of the last century … the events of the era have re-structured or even ‘revolutionized’ the Naga psyche” (Preface x; my emphasis).

Ao’s portrayal of Naga women in her stories paints a complex picture of one of a constant struggle against the mechanisms of many systems that bring potential danger and harm in their daily lives. Ao’s women face violence and marginalization from three sources of power structures namely the armed military of the Indian government, the insurgents, and the patriarchal Naga society. Ao’s women though victimized by the mechanisms of systems put in place by men are not just victims; they are also portrayed as embodiments of strength, resilience and resourcefulness; ingenious in giving protection to the men folk; and even subservient to a certain degree against the power structures that continually try to undermine them.

The stoic and resolute attitude shown by Ao’s women characters in the face of great terror and violence is exemplified in “The Last Song” (*These Hills*). Set against the backdrop of the struggle for power between the insurgents and the armed military, “The Last Song” is the story of Apenyo, a young woman of eighteen renowned in her village for her beautiful voice who is subjected to the brutality of the army of the Indian State. Apenyo’s character is caught
between the on-going battle between the “the underground army” and the Indian army who carry out a sinister plot that had been hatched to teach the Naga people a ‘lesson’ on the false premise of harbouring rebels by burning down a new church that the villagers had gathered in to celebrate the dedication of the church.

In “The Last Song”, Ao depicts how in wars and conflicts, women’s bodies often become the sites of violence. The description of the rape of Apenyo and her mother in “The Last Song” is a visceral illustration of the atrocities that a woman’s body is subjected to in situations of violence and Ao attempts to portray this:

> When she came upon the scene at last, what she saw turned her stomach: the young Captain was raping Apenyo while a few other soldiers were watching the act and seemed to be waiting for their turn. The mother, crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward … but a soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground … he bashed her head on the hard ground several times knocking her unconscious and raped her limp body, using the woman’s new lungi afterwards, which he had flung aside, to wipe himself.” (These Hills 28)

The brutal rape of mother and daughter by the forces of the Indian army inside the church depicts with realism the primal animalistic traits that violence can trigger in the struggle of power between systems that women get entrenched in, often becoming the target as the dominant power recognises the vulnerability of the sex and inflicts their own version of justice on a people that are forcibly pushed to accept the ruling government.

Ao’s portrayal of Apenyo is not only as a victim but also a symbol of bravery when confronted with impending danger. When the soldiers of the Indian army burst into the church and demands for the pastor to identify himself, Apenyo bravely bursts into a song in
order to save the pastor from being singled out. Even when the soldiers retaliate by dispersing
the congregation inside the church, Apenyo continues to sing. Her singing is juxtaposed with
the brutishness of the soldiers totting their guns: “Only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang
on…. Her mother … saw her daughter singing her heart out as if to withstand the might of
the guns…” (These Hills 27-28).

Ao’s voice emerges through the character of Apenyo to iterate that ‘good’ can triumph ‘evil’
and she espouses spirituality as a means to elevate the human spirit to a place that undermines
the destructive power of guns on the physical body.

“The Last Song” is also a critique of the patriarchal society of the Nagas. Naga women not
only have to content with the violence inflicted by men from the Indian army and the
extortions of the insurgent groups but also have to subjugate themselves to the societal norms
and traditional tribal laws that are observed in a Naga patriarchal set up. The bodies of
Apenyo and Libeni are not allowed to be buried in the village graveyard as their deaths were
unnatural and it was taboo and against traditional law to do so; this incident reflects the
identity crisis that Nagas as a society face. Even though the youngsters of the village argued
that they had “embraced Christianity long ago,” the elders counter by saying: “‘So What, we
are still Nagas aren’t we? And for us some things never change’” (These Hills 30).

Traditional law and tribal identity preceded their adopted faith, and it meant that the bodies of
the women could not even be given the dignity of burial with headstones to mark the graves.
Even though the story does not explicitly mention it, the village elders would have made the
decision, and decisions on traditional laws are usually made by men in Naga society and thus
even in death, the characters of Apenyo and Libeni, as women, cannot escape the system of
subjugation. Ao in her essay “Benevolent Subordination” writes: “The Nagas are a
patriarchal society where women have always been subordinate to men…. Their roles are strictly defined by this tradition which says that it is only men who can be decision-makers in important matters both in private and public affairs” (Peripheral Centre 125).

The ambivalent feelings that innocent civilians, caught in between the State and the insurgents, have to negotiate – whether to shelter the insurgents out of fealty to their own people or to submit to the authority of the government is seen in “The Last Song.” It also highlights the constant fear that people experience caught in the tussle between the government and ethnic Naga insurgent groups.

In “The Jungle Major” (These Hills) and “A Simple Question” (Laburnum), through her women characters, Ao illustrates how even though women are often victimized by conflicts of insurgency and counter-insurgency, they often turn out to be the saviours and rescuers of the Naga men who are engaged in the underground movement by cleverly shielding them from being taken into custody or detainment by the army. Ao portrays her women characters not as hapless victims but as ingenious forces even though they are forced to operate on the periphery of opposing dominant structures of power.

In “The Jungle Major” we follow the story of Khatila, the female protagonist who saves her husband Punaba from falling into the clutches of the Indian army. Ao situates the characters in a time of Naga history when the “patriotic fervour” and “high idealism” of joining the underground movement had picked up momentum among the Nagas who perceived the coming of government forces as “foreign” (These Hills 2-3). The story reflects the dangers that civilians put themselves in as those who were suspected of being involved in the struggle were persecuted severely and entire villages were threatened of being razed.
When Khatila’s husband joins the underground movement, she has to negotiate a slippery balance of not to “antagonise the village authorities” by making sure her husband’s presence would not implicate the participation of her village in shielding the rebels from the army (4). When news arrives of soldiers approaching her village to search for rebels and her husband still in the house, Khatila rises to the occasion to protect her husband and even outsmarts the army personnel with her quick presence of mind by disguising Punaba as a servant to help him escape. Ao portrays her as a courageous character, even when she is confronted by the presence of the young army Captain, she remains unfazed, so much so that he is reluctantly impressed: “Whereas he had expected to see a cowering woman, crazy with fear for her husband and herself, he was confronted by a dishevelled but defiant person who displayed no agitation and seemed to be utterly oblivious to danger” (*These Hills* 6).

Khatila is even credited with saving the entire village by not losing her nerve in carrying out her audacious plan of parading her husband as a servant in plain sight of the army who had been ordered to hunt him down. Had he been caught, the entire village would have paid for the crime of hiding him. That a “simple village woman” like Khatila is the catalyst used by Ao to foil “a meticulously planned ‘operation’ of the mighty Indian army” in itself registers as a protest to illustrate that women are not simply victims caught in the vicious net of violence that surrounds them but are agents of pacification who are capable of saving themselves and even their loved ones when the need arises (*These Hills* 7).

In the “A Simple Question”, it is a woman’s steely resolution and bravado that manages to secure freedom for her husband from the clutches of the army. The story is about a village woman, Imdongla, whose husband, an elder of the traditional village council known as a *gaonburah*, is taken into custody by the soldiers of the Indian army on the allegation that the village elders had been “giving supplies to the underground” (*Laburnum* 87). Informed by her
daughter after she reaches home from the fields that her husband has been taken away by the army, Imdongla goes to the army camp determined to get her husband away from the encampment by appealing to the conscience of the army Captain in charge of the camp. She tenaciously refuses to leave her husband’s side which finally wearies the Captain’s resolve to keep her husband in the army’s custody.

In this instance again, Ao’s heroine is a village woman who is described as “barely literate, able to read the Bible and the Hymn book only” but she is also “a worldly-wise woman, knowledgeable about the history and politics of the village” (Laburnum 81). Existing on the peripheries of men-dominated sphere of conflicts and politics, between appeasing the underground soldiers by paying “taxes” on time and the Indian army by dissociating with the rebels, she is able to save her husband and others on many occasions with her quick thinking and diplomacy.

Though she is a rustic villager, Imdongla is portrayed by Ao as an assertive woman who questions the elders of the villager council when news of further taxation by the underground army is announced. When she tries to advice the council, her husband reprimands her by saying: “‘Keep quiet, woman, you know nothing’” (Laburnum 85) but when the elders and her husband are taken into army custody, it is with assertive courage that she tells the army Captain that “she had come to take her husband home and would not leave without him.” She stations herself outside the room where her husband is held prisoner, and makes sure that she stays put knowing that her presence would prevent any harm that the soldiers might intend to carry out on her husband and the other village elders (Laburnum 86-87).

The most poignant moment in “A Simple Question” is when Imdongla asks the Captain “‘What do you want from us’”. It is this ‘simple question’ that appeals to the conscience of
the Captain to introspect and finally understand that the villagers faced an “impossible situation” caught in the tussle between two warring forces and also makes him question “the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain” (Laburnum 87). Through Imdongla’s question, Ao highlights the situation that Nagas have been placed in – the hostilities between the insurgents and Indian government which puts innocent civilians at the risk of violence on either side. Ao inserts herself as the collective voice of the Nagas to probe the conscience of those that are seen as ‘occupiers’.

Ao’s “Soaba” is a critique of the moral degradation of Naga society that came about with the political turmoil between the Indian government and the insurgents. It is also a critique of the inter-group conflicts that emerged as different political groups formed. Ideologies of the groups clashed, whereas some groups fought the battle in the jungle, some were seduced by power and were bought into the service of the government and remained in urban settings to administer their own version of ‘jungle justice’. Some groups were created by the backing of the State such as the “flying squad” whose members are equipped with guns, alcohol and a disdain for law, harassing and intimidating the public as they please. Ao portrays how in the government’s bid to suppress dissident voices, they constructed a situation that pitted Nagas against Nagas and destroyed the “moral fabric” of society “where friendship and loyalty were the casualties” (These Hills 12).

In “Soaba”, Imtila, the wife of the squad’s leader known as the Boss, becomes the lens through which the readers witness the abuse of power that the squad carries out. As Imtila’s husband’s notoriety and lust for power grew, his moral degradation increases too. What at first she thought was a good job that her husband had secured becomes increasingly clear to her that: “He was surrounded by a bunch of savages in his squad, some of whom were hardened criminals let loose by the authorities to carry out despicable designs” (These Hills
In their “drunken savagery” Imtila experiences nights of helplessness as she is unable to escape the sounds of “unearthly screams” and torture that her husband and the squad carries out in the house (These Hills, 16). In the end, it is ultimately her husband’s uncontrollable drunkenness and unrestrained wildness that leads to the unfortunate death of Soaba and the Boss’s eventual downfall.

Even though Imtila is described as “basically a simple woman” who is reluctantly thrust into the corrupt world of her husband, she is portrayed by Ao as a compassionate figure in her attempt to shelter Soaba. It is Imtila who takes the first steps to “make overtures of reconciliation” who has been reduced into a “whimpering helpless child” (These Hills 20). Her character epitomizes the resilience of women situated in conflict zones that are pushed into a world of violence and excesses against which they stand little chance of resisting and overcoming. By offering the reconciliation with her husband, Ao portrays her women characters as agents that can bring about peace even in the midst of violence. At the end it is Imtila who picks up “the broken pieces” to “create a new order” of her former life with her estranged husband. The action of picking up the ‘broken pieces’ is an observation that Ao draws to our attention to show how women are burdened with the responsibility to reconstruct and rebuild what is left of the destruction created in situations of violence and conflict.

Studying Ao’s women characters and their confrontations with violence in These Hills and Laburnum, there are commonalities that stand out. In situations of conflicts and in encounters with violence, Ao’s women characters are portrayed as simple and ordinary people who may appear as flat characters given the constraints of the genre of short stories, but it is an obvious and deliberate construction of characterization on her part, as her characters are meant to
convey the bigger picture of the problems of violence and insurgency that has afflicted Naga history.

The women in Ao’s stories are victimized by the varying structures of power with their psyches engaged in the violence around them in varying degrees, but Ao also makes certain that the women we encounter in her stories are resilient and brave, and certainly not helpless. Though they exist outside on the peripheries of power where all political decisions are made by men and lack the power to influence policies; they continue to fulfil important roles by functioning as agents of peace and diplomacy in situations of violence.

Ao’s narratives paint a vivid picture of the complex politics of violence created from the turbulent interactions of the Indian government, insurgency and counter-insurgency. Ao’s use of facts from historical events and interruptions in narration with explanatory notes tinges her narrative style as too much of “literalist prose.” But it fulfils its function to depict an incredibly realistic image of the era of violence that the ordinary Naga has experienced. Her stories “disarmingly enter the layered nature of violence across the sites of family, community, state and nation without lingering on external descriptions” (Tellis 39, 41).

It is apparent where Ao’s politics lies – she is sympathetic to the cause of her people but at the same time does not advocate a rigid opposition against the establishment. Her biggest concern lies with portraying the lives of the ordinary Nagas – their sufferings and tribulations, especially of the womenfolk and also to celebrate the tenacity of their spirit of resilience in the face of violence.
4.5 Insurgency and Its Violent Repercussions in Mitra Phukan’s *The Collector’s Wife*

Mitra Phukan is a prominent writer from Assam. Her novel *The Collector’s Wife* (hereafter *Collector’s Wife*) is one of the first generation of literary works written in English to have emerged from the North-East region. Phukan has also written several children’s books.

Phukan’s *Collector’s Wife* follows the life of the central protagonist, Rukmini, the trials and tribulations she faces against a backdrop of the insurgency in Assam. The novel puts into perspective the constant presence of fear and uncertainty, and the palpable atmosphere of conflicts at every corner that insurgency, agitations, students protests, counter-insurgencies have imposed on the lives of people, in Assam. Violence that affects the rural folk, townspeople, the educated, the intellectuals, bureaucrats and people from every strata of society – it reflects the indiscriminate nature of violence.

What then is insurgency in the context of Assam? A simplified definition of ‘insurgency’ can be understood as an organized rebellion that strives to overthrow an established government through subversive methods and engaging in armed conflicts to achieve the same. In *North-East India Politics and Insurgency* Chandrika Singh defines the term “as a discontent of a group of which uses violence to achieve its goal.” According to him, insurgencies are “born out of some committed ideologies of a particular group, a sect, a tribal or a community, religious or secular” (qtd. in “Reading Terror”, Longkumer 119).

Understanding insurgency in the context of Assam requires a look at the history of conflicts in the state. The British legacy of ignoring the enormous heterogeneity of the North-East frontier continued into the post-colonial era with the Indian State overlooking the complexities of governance in the region. When secessionist seeds were planted with the Naga movement after the British left in 1947, nationalist movements erupted in different
states of the region with Assam witnessing the rise of ULFA (The United Liberation Front of Assam) in 1970s. Like the ULFA, there are other prominent insurgent groups in Assam that engage in armed violence in the state. A variety of factors cause these nationalistic groups to arise and the lack of “human security” caused by “unemployment, poverty, a feeling of deprivation, corruption, underdevelopment, devastation caused by floods are among the factors that act as a breeding ground for ULFA” according to Nani Gopal Mahanta in “What Makes Assam a Perpetual Conflict Zone?”(105).

It is this situation of extreme socio-economic problems and deprivation that drives insurgency to operate and help to seal its sustained presence in Assam. Also, the response of the Indian State to insurgency has been “militarist” with “the Indian army and paramilitary forces” using extreme authoritarian methods that approaches the complex inter-ethnic insurgencies by attempting to divide the rebel groups with the help of renegades; corruption of rebel leaders by seducing them with luxurious lifestyles; prolonging the talks on negotiations instead of aiming for solutions; the use of the police and the army to impose draconian laws are the many facets to the complexities of insurgency in Assam (Mahanta 109).

Another aspect of conflicts in Assam comes from the politics of identity caused by the influx of illegal immigrants. The contention is mainly in the occupation of indigenous lands by illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The Assam Movement from 1979-1985 saw the biggest drive against illegal immigrants who were considered as ‘foreigners’. The grievances of the movement continue to remain unresolved creating animosity and distrust among the ethnic communities of the state. These issues have been responsible in the proliferation of the formation of student groups and unions that take part in protests and agitations which affect the daily lives of people with protests, curfews and bandhs that bring economic losses to businesses, disrupt mobility and hamper the quality of life.
In the novel, Phukan narrates the story of Rukmini, the wife of the District Collector (here on DC), the administrative head of Parbatpuri, who teaches English Literature at a local college. Rukimi lives an unfulfilled life, dissatisfied with her job and marriage. Even though she has an understanding mother-in-law, her husband, Siddharth, engrossed in his administrative work shuts out Rukmini emotionally and physically. Adding to her unhappiness is the couple’s futile attempts to have a child and the gossip that she is subjected to for her inability to produce one. Rukmini’s life is a tedious cycle of evenings spent at the Parbatpuri Club where she accompanies her husband to meet with other bureaucrats and their wives or being stuck in her bungalow with nothing to do. In the backdrop of this matrimonial disharmony and crisis in Rukmini’s life, Phukan also presents a commentary on the threat of insurgency and violence that affects the state of Assam.

Throughout the novel, the reader is presented with the threat of insurgency and violence that looms over the atmosphere of the narration as the reader follows the life of Rukimini. The first half of the novel dwells on mundane life of Rukmini as she goes about her business as the wife of the DC and the personal unhappiness she has in her married life until she meets Manoj Mahanta, a tyre salesperson, with whom she has a very fleeting affair. Till that point, the news that she hears everyday in the staff room and in the Parbatpuri Club about the kidnappings, extortions and killings seems very distant and impersonal. It is only in the second half of the novel, that the foreboding of conflicts in the background becomes personal and comes close to home.

At the start of the novel, Rukmini’s has an impersonal connection with the events related to insurgency through updates that she regularly gets in the staff room of her college and at the Parbatpuri Club from the other wives. Even though the news of atrocities, killings and kidnappings disturb her, she is distant and removed from these happenings as her perspective
is from that of a privileged life as the wife of the DC. The position of Rukmini’s husband’s as an administrator ensures that she is merely an observer in the beginning and is often protected from routine protocols such as house-searches and vehicular searches that insurgents and army personnel regularly carry out in their constant struggle for power and for security reasons. Being the wife of an important official in the town cushions her and gives her a feeling of false security as though such happenings could never occur in her life.

The staff room and Parbatpuri Club discussions of the daily news of killings and kidnapping give away the manner in which people become desensitized to violence partly due to the frequency of it happening and partly due to its overexposure in the media and shows the callous attitude that begins to emerge when violence becomes weaved into the everyday fabric of life in conflict-zones. The focus of their discussions is on the morbid details of how the killings are carried out instead of showing empathy for the victims. The frenzied account of a recent murder at a tea estate at the Parbatpuri Club, as Rukmini sits with the wives of the other bureaucrats, reveals their careless attitude:

“They say both the husband’s and the wife’s fingernails were ripped off while they were still alive, and their soles were burnt with cigarettes!” This, from Naseem Islam, who was teetering with excitement three seats from Rukmini’s right.

Rukmini reflected that the list of abominable tortures inflicted on the unfortunate couple, was growing rapidly after their death…. Within a couple of days, more gruesome details would do the rounds of the town. In a week, this particular event would cease to be the sole topic of conversation, as another new horror would burst upon to titillate the townspeople even further…. As long as none of their own
was involved in the serial catastrophes, the people of Parbatpuri shivered deliciously and gossiped endlessly. (57-58)

It is not only in the staff room that Rukmini encounters news of conflicts and violence carried out by insurgents. There are protests in the premises of the college organized by student leaders who are sympathetic to the insurgent group MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) and its stand especially against the presence of illegal ‘foreigners’ in Parbatpuri and across Assam. When she sees the faces of her students glowing with “sincerity” and “idealism” at the protests in the college, she is reminded that some of these bright and intelligent young faces would become future insurgents (91).

It is Phukan’s critique of the how student unions and other similar agitations make these ‘illegal foreigners’ their “scapegoat” for every problem that the state faces instead of looking into the real reasons behind its troubles: “But was it always the illegal immigrants who were to blame for everything, from the poor quality of education in the local schools and colleges, to the recurring floods that devastated the land?” and how there is a false idea that in getting rid of these foreigners, that Assam would experience “a kind of utopia” (89).

Another issue that Phukan highlights is that these students start out as being members of student unions and gradually turn into “full-fledged, gun-toting, Kachin-trained, fearsome terrorist” where one day they are agitating peacefully and eventually progress into joining groups that “did not believe in peaceful means to gain their ends.” It is Phukan’s critique on the failure on the part of those in the establishment and teachers to guide and teach the proper path to nation-building during the formative years of the students thus continuing to feed the vicious cycle of insurgency (89).
The lack of “human security” in Assam cited by Mahanta for the rise of secessionist groups and insurgency is echoed in the Collector’s Wife when Rukmini observes that some of her own students would “swell MOFEH’s ranks, or join another, similar organization … forced by the lack of other career opportunities to take to terrorism as a profession” (156). It was only “logical progression” that these students with their irrelevant degrees and qualifications, and the lack of opportunities to gain monetary comfort would lead them down the road to join “the creed of the gun” (182). Through Rukmini’s point of view and perspective of the conflicts, Phukan attempts to bring attention to the actual ailment and not the symptoms that politics in the state suffers from.

When Rukmini observes the faces of her students at the protest, it is Phukan emphasizing on the heterogeneity of the different ethnic and racial groups that make up Assamese society: “The almond eyes, the golden skins of the Mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexions of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners!” She highlights the question of identity which is a major reason for inter-ethnic conflicts and the reason for driving out those that they saw as ‘foreigners’ for not fitting a racial profile. The irony of the situation is the multi-racial faces of the students protesting against the presence of foreigners. Phukan is critical of protests and agitations that specifically target certain racial groups as ‘foreigners’ thereby using violent methods to expel them. Historically, Assam has witnessed waves of migrations into its lands from the Shans of Burma and the Tai-Ahoms with their oriental features to the Indo-Aryan stock from the mainland. Assamese society is a colourful blend of many ethnicities and so for Phukan, the claim of certain groups that Assam belongs to a certain ethnicity or race or tribe is essentially a flawed argument.
Phukan also gives a realistic depiction of life that ordinary people experience living in a perpetual conflict zones like the North-East and in particular Assam especially by depicting how it affects the quality of life and induces fear-psychosis in people:

The streets of Parbatpuri were almost empty, even though it was just past ten o’clock. These days people shut themselves indoors by eight every evening…. People checked and rechecked their locks several times before going to bed. A knock on the door at night caused panic…. For, these days, who knew what would follow the knock? Gunshots, extortions, kidnappings, or perhaps a request for shelter by armed men who had the police hot on their heels. (64)

So far in the novel, Rukmini is situated away from the violence, violence that she often hears of in the staff room and at the Parbatpuri Club gossip, or has observed in the protests staged in her college by the students. Phukan presents Rukmini’s affair with Manoj to run parallel with her encounters with violence from insurgency and conflicts. The cloistered life of Rukmini begins to fall apart as her involvement with Manoj becomes deeper and as their affair blossoms, so does the frequency of Rukmini’s encounters with situations of danger related to insurgency.

When she accepts Manoj’s invitation to drive out of Parbatpuri and visit a tea-estate, she experiences for the first time the fear that citizens are subjected to during a ‘vehicular check’ – a routine security check conducted on vehicles with travelling passengers done by security forces and the army to sniff out insurgents and their sympathizers. During the vehicular search on the highway by paramilitary forces, Rukmini, who had never been subjected to a search previously, safeguarded by her position as the DC’s wife, is terrified. “This frisson of fear that ran like a swift-moving spider down her spine, this tightening at the back of her neck. This feeling of invasion of privacy” (125) aptly describes her fear and she begins to
identify with the personal experiences of people who complain of the high-handed manner and rough handling in which innocent citizens are subjected to during such security searches.

This incident sets the ominous tone for more encounters with situations related to insurgency for Rukmini. When a bureaucrat named Mr. Hrishikesh Deuri, a club regular, is violently gunned down, what used to be gossip fodder for the wives at the Parbatpuri Club becomes very real. For the people within this privileged circle of bureaucrats and administrators and their wives, the news of death and violence was all around them but “until it struck home, it remained a distant thing, something that would never enter their lives, at least in the foreseeable future” (171).

For Rukmini, it is the first time that she witnesses up close the bereavement that is caused by these violent acts of insurgency and through her eyes we see the trauma caused by the killing on the wife and the children. They are described as “broken, disoriented, still uncomprehending of the full magnitude” of the incident that had just taken place in the house as shocked into a stupor. The scene at the dinner table where Mr. Deuri had been gunned down realistically captures the violent manner in which life is snatched away by the insurgents:

Nandini Deuri and her three children were sitting around a table still piled with noodles, chilli chicken and sweet and sour prawns. Nobody had cleared away the table after the killing. Splotches of what looked like tomato sauce, but which, Rukmini realized after a sickened moment, must be Deuri’s blood, lay on the table, a chair, and the floor. A cluster of policemen stood at one end of the room, gathered around a large, lumpy shape under the sheet. Deuri’s body, Rukmini realized with a shock. (171)
Phukan narrative reminds that violence and conflicts are never removed from the progression of Rukmini’s own personal story. The protests and agitations that Rukmini had observed in her college finally comes to a head when she goes for an outing with Manoj in the central part of the town where she is caught up in a clash between the students who has taken their protests onto the streets against the illegal foreigners and the police who attempt to clamp down on the public protests. When Rukmini is injured in the confrontation between the two sides and ends up in the hospital, the reader is reminded by Phukan that insurgency and violence are weaved into the fabric of life for people in conflict zones.

In the *Collector’s Wife*, Phukan frequently attributes the incidents of extortions, looting, kidnapping and murders of innocent civilians to the activities of the insurgent group MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) and other similar groups. The MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) is Phukan’s fictionalized representation of insurgents groups such as the ULFA (The United Liberation Front of Assam) who carry out numerous atrocities and cause an atmosphere of fear to prevail in Assam. The ULFA (The United Liberation Front of Assam) is made up of local recruits mostly school dropouts and small time criminals who are part of a corrupted nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and contractors adept at siphoning government funds for development purposes. Through her fictionalized creation of the MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland), Phukan is critical of the overflow of many other stylized insurgent groups that cash in on the notoriety of being a ‘terrorist’ and engaging in corruption – the “terrorist-out-of-convenience groups” and the “fake terrorists” who are according to her “were little more than gangs of dacoits, thinly disguised as insurgents”; Phukan is quick to identify that these groups operate on a false sense of “pseudo-patriotism” to carry out their “anti-social intent” (81). She is also equally critical of their abuse of power and excessive use of violence to achieve their aims.
Phukan offers an honest but dismal description of the people that constitute these insurgent groups and their motivations for carrying out acts of violence:

And many faintly delinquent youths, who, in another age, or another state, would have been content to mug and loot passerby, now jumped enthusiastically onto the insurgency bandwagon, and concentrated ... on armed robbery, extortion and kidnappings, as their chosen career ... youths who had officially laid down their arms before the authorities ... found life in this particular mainstream dull. Occasionally, they would let off steam by indulging in acts of mayhem with the weapons that they were officially allowed to keep, for their own protection against their previous cohorts. All these groups took care to inform their victims, as well as their victims’ kin, that they were from one or the other of the well-known terrorist outfits, before whisking them off to remote forest lands, or relieving them of their valuables. (81)

In the *Collector’s Wife*, these insurgents, particularly the MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) are responsible for power blackouts; kidnappings of influential or moneyed individuals to use as pawn for later negotiations; demands through extortions on innocent civilians; and creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and terror in the district. Though there are often sympathizers among characters in the novel, Phukan’s stand on insurgency is transparent to the reader and it is not one of admiration. Even though she has her reservations against these insurgent outfits, her portrayal of them is not entirely black and white given that Rukmini’s driver turns out to be a MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) man assigned to protect her.

For Rukmini, the final phase of her encounter with insurgency is brought to fruition with Phukan placing her in the throes of a reality that the narration slowly builds up to. Before she
can even process the news of her pregnancy or the gossip from her presence at the confrontation between the students and the police or that her driver, Anil, had all along been a MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) member assigned to protect her being a “prime target” for other groups (272); she is confronted with the news of Manoj’s kidnapping by insurgents.

Strangely, it is Manoj’s kidnapping and the learning of her husband’s infidelity that opens a bridge of communication for Rukmini and Siddharth. Her husband agrees to accept her unborn child as his own and Rukmini is finally able to question him on his neglect of her. The incident ironically brings the couple closer together for the first time in their marriage as they begin to communicate and understand each other. But the harmony that they experience is short-lived.

The culmination of the final phase of Rukmini’s experience with insurgency happens when Siddharth on secret mission to intercept a group of MOFEH (The Movement for an Exclusive Homeland) men and is tragically killed in the encounter. The violence of insurgency at long last becomes a very personal experience for Rukmini’s unlike the other times when she had just heard news of killings and kidnappings. Not only does she lose her husband with whom she has reconciled but also the father of her unborn child, Manoj, who never gets to know of its existence.

At the news of Siddharth’s death, Rukmini realizes that the life that she had led as the wife of the DC was not immune to the dangers of violence caused by insurgency. In a land rife with insurgency, the life led as a bureaucrat’s wife was in fact just an illusion of security and safety – that anyone could be affected by the violence irrespective of who they were:
All she knew was that the monster has suddenly entered her very home. She has seen its macabre dance all around her these past two years, seen the imprint of its heavy feet on lives all around her. Foolishly, she has thought herself, and her life to be outside the pale of the monster’s attention. As if, for some reason, she would escape being flicked by its poison-tipped tail, being scared by its fetid, fiery breath. Suddenly, when she has been least expecting it, with a mocking laugh that echoed all around the hills of the town, the monster has pirouetted straight into her life. (337)

Also important to note is that Phukan uses symbolism in her narrative to associate the features of the land with the bloodshed and acts of violence that insurgency has caused in Assam. The symbolism of the “Red River,” which appears throughout the novel, evokes the features of the landscape of Assam and is associated with the violence of insurgency and counter-insurgency: “The Red River in spate, wearing its full monsoon regalia…. Red with tumultuous volume of water that rushed through the cleft between two hill ranges, Red with fury at being thus confined. Red with the violence that raged on its banks” (342).

Like the recurring image of the river, so is its colour a reminder of the pervasive presence of violence and insurgency. Red becomes the colour of violence and her description of Manoj’s death at the encounter when “a sudden red flower bloomed on Manoj Mahanta’s chest …. For an instant, blood swirled above the spot where he has sunk, a wreath of red over his watery grave” (345). The line is reminiscent of Easterine’s Kire’s words in “Red is the Colour of Blood” where she writes: “I am grateful blood is coloured red. That it will always catch one’s attention whenever it is spilt. No one can walk away from the sight of blood unmoved” (389). The jarring imagery of blood and the colour red is a poignant reminder of the frailty of life and the toll of violence on innocent civilians who are caught up in conflicts and battles that are not of their making.
The novel ends with a moving scene of Rukmini receiving the dead body of her husband. It ends with Rukmini shedding tears for two men who had been in her life; for her unborn child; for all the senseless deaths; for the ones who were killed at the encounter; tears for all the women who had lost their loved ones too. Through this scene, Phukan shows the indiscriminate nature of violence that affects all people from every strata of society living in conflicts zones where security lapses and insurgency is the order of the day. She also highlights the effects of insurgency especially on women who are left to mourn the dead:

“Tears for all the other women … all coalescing into a single figure of tear-shrouded grief, as they looked down at the slain bodies of their husbands, their brothers, their sons, wrapped in blood-blotched sheets” (349).

In the *Collector’s Wife*, Phukan’s narrative constructs a ‘true to life’ mirror of the atrocities and psychological fears that civilians in places of insurgency have to cope and deal with on a daily basis. It is not simply Rukmini’s story and her experience with insurgency that Phukan delves into, she also exposes the complexities of the nature of violence and the causes for the rise of insurgency in these conflict-zones. She is critical of insurgents and their politics which she views as self-serving but at the same time is critical too of the lack of initiation on the part of people in positions of authority who are unable to find peaceful and constructive resolutions to these conflicts.

It is obvious that Phukan does not endorse the argument of claiming Assam, or in this case Parbatpuri, just for some certain ethnic or racial groups who believe in the notion that they are the legitimate owners of Assam and should drive out all ‘foreigners’; for her, the agitations and protests staged by student unions and supported by rebel groups against foreigners is based on an argument that is illogical considering that Assamese society is a amalgamation of diverse ethnicities and races who came to occupy the land over centuries.
In her depiction of students and the unions in the novel, Phukan also shows her concern for the future generations who could benefit by making changes to the education system and creating better opportunities for students which can help divert them away from joining insurgent groups. She highlights the importance of the role of teachers who can give students the right tools and skills at nation-building instead of antagonizing the students by distancing themselves.

Phukan primary concern in her exploration of insurgency through Rukmini’s story in the *Collector’s Wife* appears to be a desire to depict the nature of conflicts and violence from all angles and to emphasize the suffering and trauma that ordinary people are subjected as the effects of insurgency is all-pervasive and far-reaching, percolating into every system, strata and community in Assamese society whether one is a foreigner or a local.

4.6 Xenophobia and Ethno-Political Conflicts: The Causes of Violence in Bijoya

**Sawian’s Shadow Men**

Bijoya Sawian is a writer from Shillong, Meghalaya. She has three publications of translated works to her name – *The Teachings of Elders, Popular Khasi Folk Tales* and *About One God*. Her works predominantly deals with Khasi culture and life in Meghalaya. *Shadow Men* is Sawain’s debut novel.

*Shadow Men* is set in Shillong and Sawian gives a nuanced representation of the peculiarities and particular uniqueness of the small hill town through the use of local slang words and interjecting the story with customs and traditions that are reminiscent of Shillong and its people. Even though the novel starts off as a murder mystery, the narrative of *Shadow men* is also used cleverly by Sawian to give a commentary on Khasi society; the matrilineal system; communal and ethnic tension giving rise to violence; and the corrupted politics of the state of
Meghalaya and many other issues that are pertinent to ask in the present scenario that the people face in the state. *Shadow Men* is a broad canvas where Sawian brings to the readers’ attention many issues that concern the state. On her book, Sawian makes the observation that: “The issues in my book were staring me in the face: the erosion of values, matriliney [matrilineal society], the horrific corruption in politics, the despair and angst all around, and of course, the few unsullied souls that still exist to remind us that there is hope, all is not lost …” (Battacharjee; my emphasis).

In the *Shadow Men*, Sawian also explores the issue of the treatment of outsiders known as ‘dhkars’ by locals – the label given to anyone who is not ethnically indigenous to Meghalaya – and the communal unrest that Shillong society balances on precariously. Even though Shillong and the state of Meghalaya projects itself as an island of peace and harmony when compared to the corrupt politics and insurgency which is rampant in other states of the North-East region; it still has underlying politics of uneasy tension between different communities and ethnicities. These tensions sporadically escalate into large scale conflicts and at times into violence.

Shillong society is made up of predominantly the Khasis and other ethnic tribes, followed by residents from other states particularly from Assam and illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Although a cosmopolitan society by and large, communal tensions do arise due to xenophobic tendencies towards mainlanders or people who are not of the mongoloid stock.

On the other end of the spectrum of conflicts, the novel also foregrounds the issue of ethnic tensions among the three major ethnic groups, the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos in Meghalaya where issues on reservation quotas and lack of representation in the political arena crop up time and again. At present, there are rising demands for separate state initiated
by militant groups from the three major ethnic groups because of reasons like the employment policy of the Meghalaya government which is discussed in the novel (Zehol 46).

Tying in with exposing the xenophobic aspect of Shillong society and the uneasy tension between different communities residing in the town, *Shadow Men* is narrated from an outsider’s perspective (a person not ethnically Khasi). Rasheel, the protagonist of the novel is a visitor to the town and is swept up into the intrigues of a murder for which she seeks answers.

The use of an ‘outsider’ as the main protagonist also serves the purpose of narrating from a neutral and objective point of view. That Sawian employs an outsider’s perspective in her narration reflects her own background of mixed parentage – her father coming from a Hindu family and her mother from the predominantly Christian Khasi community. This gives Sawian the unique perspective as an ‘insider’ to Khasi social norms and traditions, and at the same time have the necessary objectivity in the narrative to talk from the point of view of an ‘outsider’. The narrative of the novel is not confined to the geographical space of Shillong but sweeps in and out to other places where the reader is informed about Rasheel’s background, the trauma of her parents’ murder in Delhi and the reasons for her visit to Shillong.

The narrative style of Sawian in the novel consists of crisp and staccato conversations between characters from which the reader can glean the action that is unfolding in their world – not all events in its entirety but partial glimpses that sustains the interests and the build up of the mystery till the end. Sawian’s insistence on using Khasi words and other linguistic liberties into her narrative without giving explanatory notes is evocative of Hélène Cixous’s call for women writers in “The Laugh of the Medusa” to set themselves free from the chains of the structure of language and grammar constructed by men that women have so far
cautiously written in – to break free from ““within”” the language of men and to turn the
“discourse of men” around “to explode it, turn it around, and seize it … to invent for herself a
language …” that is strictly her own (886-87).

The tone of mystery and the foreboding of violence are set early on in the novel where the
unverified murder takes place:

Three figures were tumbling down the slope through the mist, carrying what seemed
… like a long duffle bag. Out of the cottage, a fourth figure emerged, carrying a small
suitcase and walking quickly through the mist down to the stream…. Just before he
disappeared from sight, the slim, medium built figure in a maroon shirt looked back at
the cottage once. (4)

A violent event forms the crux of the novel and is established early on when the protagonist
sees three young men approaching the cottage next door with a gun in hand only to be
followed by the sound of gunfire and inadvertently becomes a witness to what would turn out
to be a deadly encounter for a dkhar.

Amidst the descriptions of the beautiful scenery of Shillong, Sawian is careful not to portray
the town as a paradise because there are hints that conflicts and the presence of gun violence
even in a relatively peaceful town. This notion is brought home when Rasheel enquires the
domestic help, Kmie U Flin, after hearing the gunshots from the cottage if guns are carried
around by people and the help answers in the affirmative about police and CRPF men
patrolling with guns, even militants and “naughty boys” (8).

That dkhars inhabit a space of fear and uncertainty in Shillong society is reflected in the
novel when Rasheel is gripped by panic when she comes to learn that the inhabitants of the
cottage are Biharis employed as gardeners. Discrimination against non-locals is
unapologetically done in the open and the uneasy fear that communities considered as outsiders is evident by Rasheel’s reaction on hearing the names ‘Suresh’ and ‘Ravi’ – names which identify the individuals as non-locals. The discriminatory attitude is also evident in the justice system when the police are called to investigate the missing Bihari boys; the cop is dismissive of Raseel’s testimony and affirms that it is simply a case of robbery where one was the victim and the other the culprit. The fact that Ravi, one of the Bihari boys, is framed for the murder of Suresh without any investigation or without a body, illustrates the apathetic approach by the police in solving crimes especially those involving dkhars. When Ravi “confessed to the crime” in the police report, it hints at a confession obtained under duress (33).

Reasons that arouse these xenophobic feelings range from dkhars “usurping” jobs and “stealing our women” (33). The irony of the xenophobia that pervades in Shillong society is apparent in the easy acceptance and assimilation of Bollywood culture, Hindi films and songs yet there is a strong unwelcoming attitude to the presence of people that ethnic locals considered as outsiders from the mainland or in other words from ‘India’. Considering India as the ‘other’ shows the underlying sentiments of people not only restricted to Shillong but throughout the North-East – a feeling of separateness from the mainland contributed by the lack of participation, representation and acceptance in mainstream politics and media which reflects the complex politics of identity in the North-East.

Sawian takes care to moot the point that xenophobic tendencies are present everywhere whether in Shillong where the minority becomes the outsider or whether in mainland India where a North-Eastern person becomes the outsider. If people in Shillong had resistance to outsiders then the feelings are equally mutually equal when Robert says: “‘We all know what the true feelings are. Let’s face it, the dkhars will always look down on us tribals’” (28).
Xenophobia, according to Rasheel is weaved into the fabric of Indian society regardless of geographical locations when she reminds Robert that: “‘In India everyone looks down on everyone, The Brahmins turn up their noses on the Kshatriyas, the Kshatriyas look down on the Kayasths, the Kayasths on the Vaishyas and it just goes on. My parents were both Sikhs but my mother had to rebel when she married my father because he wasn’t a Jat Sikh’” (28).

In the *Shadow Men*, the conflicts between the major ethnic groups are mentioned frequently – especially the conflict between the Khasis and the Garos. In the North-East, Lucy Zehol, points out that the issue of ethnicity is like a “double-edged sword” as “it unites communities for political demands from outsiders but fails to organise the communities within a common entity” (46).

Research studies on the conflicts between indigenous ethnic groups categorize it as “ethno-political conflicts.” According to Emily Pia and Thomas Diez in “Conflict and Human Rights: A Theoretical Framework,” conflicts are marked by opposition and incompatibility of different interests and beliefs between individuals, groups or societal positions. Such incompatibilities can escalate into violence and destructive outcomes, and “ethno-political” conflicts specifically imply that there is “a core incompatibility between so-called ethnic group groups and their political organization” (2).

The claimant to equal status and reservation rights in the government and rise of militancy has been observed in indigenous ethnic group conflicts between the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya with the latter demanding equal privileges and representation. To corroborate the use of the term ‘ethno-political conflicts’ to the situation between these two groups, Lucy Zehol’s insight into the source of ethnic tension in the Northeast should be noted. She writes that ethnic tension in the region, “follows a clear hierarchical-horizontal pattern, stratified by
the number of people, quantity of money, amount of power, attention and privileges that a
group is perceived as getting from the government.” Zehol also remarks that the
psychological fear of losing privileges stimulate such conflicts (64).

This fear of losing privileges is apparent when a disgruntled Robert informs Rasheel and
Kmie U Flin that agitations have been going on against the government to make changes to
the quotas (reservation) for education and jobs. His diatribe continues with him bursting out:
“The Garos don’t deserve 40 per cent, the vacancies are never filled, they go waste, and we
are more deserving…. Yes, Khasis and Jaintias 60 per cent and Garos 30 per cent… and the
rest 10 per cent. It’s reasonable” (31). Such statements reveal the deep seated resentments and
the fear of losing privileges that the majority has enjoyed so far.

Sawian also forges a possible connection with the rise in conflicts and the matrilineal system
practiced by the Khasis. The frustration and angst of young men without jobs and stripped of
their sense of purpose which to aggravate the problem. Robert’s angry outburst criticizing the
Khasi matriarchal traditions and customs gives an important insight into the problems
advancing slowly into Khasi society:

The men here are in a terrible state. We are sad, we are desperate and all these terrible
emotions stem from that. We own not a patch of land, not a penny, nothing. Even our
children belong to their mothers. If we get a government job – fine. If not – then
what? Rot … Yes, we are doing something now. We are fighting for equitable
distribution of wealth and registration of marriages but till all this comes through most
of us just float around like scum in a stagnant well. (34-35)

Robert attributes the Khasi attitude towards the *dkhars* and the ethnic violence with the Garos
on the purposelessness of the men in the Khasi matriarchal system. Bewildered by their lack
of purpose in life, these men instead of pin-pointing the exact source of their frustrations, take
up different causes engaging in anti-government activities, inciting communal resentment and channelling their pent-up anger into committing crimes and misdemeanours.

Sawian’s narrative also deliberates on the corruptive power of the ambitious individuals like “Boss” who will go to great lengths to stage anarchic scenes or masterminding senseless deaths like Suresh’s murder to further their political ambitions by masquerading as saviours and engaging in smear campaigns of the ruling party (86). In their pursuit of political power, these ‘boss-like’ individuals recruit “innocent and idealistic young idiots” to his “private army” to carry out their dirty deeds of murder and extortions (87). Sawian portrays these characters as morally bankrupt with their minds “blank” and their souls “jammed” and just not giving a “damn” (90). Men like Boss corrupt from the very top, controlling “ministers, bureaucrats, cops, businessmen” playing their political intrigues by preventing Rasheel from finding out the truth and trying to intimidate her; replacing the actual Ravi locked up in the jail to pervert the course of justice who “conveniently” ends up dead from drinking poison in his prison cell; and carrying out the killings of Robert and Bah Aibor, the owner of the house that Rasheel had been staying at (108, 153).

Sawian at the end of her narrative does not provide resolutions or answers; it is as though she consciously constructs Shadow Men simply as a commentary of Shillong society and the issues that has been cropping up in recent years. In simply addressing the problems and not offering answers, Sawian appears to be stoking the embers in the hope that it sparks debates and discussions on these matters. It is the writer’s concern for her people’s future and the direction in which they are heading that guides Sawian in writing fiction that mirrors the truth, this motive can be gleaned from her own words:

A turbulent August in Shillong almost a decade ago sowed the idea of the book….

The sadness I felt when I thought of all those young people out there, with few or no
alternatives beyond the hills because of their circumstances, suddenly poured out in a huge torrent of words. I suppose it was a kind of catharsis for me. (Battacharjee)

4.7 Conclusion

In examining the select fictional works of Temsula Ao, Mitra Phukan and Bijoya Sawian where the dominant theme is violence, there emerges a clear concern on the writers’ part that there is a sincere desire to depict the trauma that has been endured by victims of political violence, especially the most vulnerable in society – women and children. The disconnection between structures of power where policies are made and carried out for ordinary people, in particular women is minimal and bleak. It fails to take into consideration, especially policies that are formed in situations of conflicts and violence, the needs and interests of women and children. According to “Women, War, and Peace,” an assessment on women in situations of armed conflicts, out of seventy-five percent of civilian casualties in contemporary armed conflicts, most are women and children (Rehn and Johnson-Sirleaf).

The stories of women and their experience of violence by women writers “gives visibility to those disproportionately affected by armed conflict; these stories must be amplified to eliminate the disconnection between the powerful and the powerless to provide understanding of the dynamics of conflict” (Noma 10). It is not only the narratives of women in conflict situations that they bring to light through their fiction, but also the ‘collective experience’ of an entire marginalized region. These women writers concentrate on the traumatic effects that have been “retrieved from the memories of those who have suffered the wounds” with the intention of exposing the atrocities and violation of human rights that have been carried out for decades in the region (Noma 10).
Even though these stories and fictional depictions may not be considered as great literature from a literary point of view, the voices of these women are symbolic as it can be taken as a “form of protest” given by a “silenced and numbed” people (Misra 311). In histories of nations and peoples, women and their stories are often invisible because they are erased from statistics and omitted from the annals of events, but when women articulate violence and their experience of it through fiction, they are afforded a “visibility” denied to them (Noma 10).
Notes

1. The phrase ‘never forget’ is a commemorative slogan usually associated with the Holocaust but has since entered popular usage to refer to tragic events or events where memory preservation is emphasized and stressed upon.

2. In Showalter’s essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” she highlights anthropologist Edwin Ardener’s studies attempting to outline a model of women’s culture which suggest that women constitute a “muted group.” Historically, female experience has not been accommodated in androcentric models and has become “muted.” Ardener suggests that there is a women culture that generates beliefs and ideas of social reality but because it is articulated through the consciousness of the dominant group, those expressions and experiences become “muted.”

3. For further reading, see Banerjee’s essay “Between Two Armed Patriarchies: Women in Assam and Nagaland.”

4. The word ‘underground’ is often used interchangeably with ‘insurgents’ to denote the act of going under the radar by insurgents to engage in the use of guerrilla tactics to fight against the government forces or the armed military.

5. A term used by North-Easterners to identify people from Mainland India.
Works Cited


Hazarika, Sanjoy. “In Times of Conflict the Real Victims are Women.” Gill, Peripheral Centre, p. 73.


Zama, Margaret Ch. “Locating Trauma in Mizo Literature: The Beloved Bullet.” Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity, edited by Margaret Ch. Zama, Sage Publications, 2013, pp. 66 -73