Chapter Six

Conclusion

If, then, one should try to sum up the character of women’s fiction at the present moment, one would say that it is courageous; it is sincere, it keeps closely to what women feel…. It does not insist upon its femininity but at the same time, a woman’s book is not written as a man would write it.

“Women and Fiction” Virginia Woolf

The necessity and relevance of women’s writing holds a legitimate claim irrespective of the place that it originates from and this applies to women writers emerging from India’s North-East region. The writings of women have brought focus and attention to the observations, struggles and responses of women that has been categorized as the ‘other’ in human history. The female ‘self’ and ‘being’ which has been defined traditionally only through the frameworks of kinship, marriage and reproduction in relation to men has emerged through women’s writing to question the oppression and subordination that has been imposed upon the gender by male power structures.. Women’s writing also undertakes the task to bring alternative meanings to the female ‘self’ instead of the predefined ‘being’ that patriarchy has reduced the gender to.

We have noted in the preceding chapters that there are feminine concerns that are discernible in the fiction of North-East women writers. Emphasis has been given to analyze and evaluate the less visible discourses that lies embedded within the select texts which cannot be achieved through a traditional androcentric reading. Hence, the present study has laid greater stress on the literary features of the select fiction and concentrating on their thematic preoccupations that brings out feminine concerns.
The feminist features can be found at several places in the texts. Even though their fiction may not carry overt feminist ideas and agendas, implied feminist concerns can be discerned and analyzed, and this has been done by examining dominant themes, character analysis and other narrative techniques. These factors help the present study to be more representative and relevant, thus arriving at conclusions that are well-grounded and more valid.

Given that women’s writings and its study requires critically examining the space of subjectivity that women inhabit within male structures; the present study oriented itself towards a subjective approach in analyzing the select texts. Since the present investigation looked solely into the fiction of North-East women writers, the subjective approach can seem undeniably narrow. However, a completely objective approach would fail to pick up the subtle nuances of the features of North East writings. It is for this reason that a purposeful balance between subjective and objective approaches has been adopted to bring about substantial and meaningful discussions.

The foregoing chapters traced an evolutionary path of North-East writings with special focus on the fiction of women writers. The study highlighted that the most persistent feminine concerns that appear in their fiction are:

(i) The effects of violence caused by conflicts of insurgency and separatism on women. Through fiction, they shed light on the female experience of violence – violence which is specifically related to the geo-politics of the North-East.

(ii) Discrimination and oppression of women caused and perpetuated by cultural practices and traditions.

To analyze these concerns each chapter was arranged in a chronological pattern to arrive at an understanding of the approach that was taken to reading the select fiction. Chapter One
gave a background to North-East literature(s). **Chapters Two** focused on feminism and its influence on feminist criticism which consequentially impacted women’s writing in India. **Chapter Three** focused on giving an overview of women’s writing in the North-East and the relevance of feminist criticism in reading their works to identify an emergent feminist consciousness. **Chapter Four** focused on the female experience of violence as presented in the fiction of North-East women writers. **Chapter Five** examined oppression and discrimination as presented in the fiction of North-East women writers.

The discussion in **Chapter One** noted that the literature produced from the region feature concerns that are very specific to the region, its people and their cultures. Fiction by women writers while conveying many feminine concerns also displays these specific features – a quality that can be termed as being very ‘North-Eastern’. Even though narratives from diverse cultures in each state from the region are collectively categorized as ‘North-East literature(s)’, there are commonalties that tie them together. This unique niche that it occupies features thematic concerns that can easily distinguish it as characteristically ‘North-Eastern’. These preoccupations include violence as a major thematic concern and the display of a certain ‘strong-rootedness’ in the land.

This ‘strong-rootedness’ in the land which is presented in the fiction is achieved through literary techniques that includes the use of words from ethnic dialects and languages in the narrative style and the use of geographical features of regional places in the narrative settings. These techniques are abundantly used in order to convey the writer’s strong attachment and connection with the place that he/she originates from. The quality of ‘strong-rootedness’ of North-East literatures may be attributed to the desire to claim a niche for a body of literature that is still in its early formative stages hence the inclination to distinguish itself as distinct and unique.
These features, as mentioned earlier, surface frequently in the fiction of North-East women writers and appeared in the discussions that came in the following chapters.

With these literary features that are dominant in North-East writings established, the present study noted a significant development in the literature emerging from the region which is that a large majority of contemporary fiction are produced by women. This development necessitated the following questions: (i) Where should one posit the writings of women from the North-East? (ii) What is the significance of this emerging trend of women writers?

To answer these questions, **Chapter Two** traversed the intellectual history of women’s writing tracing its origins in feminism as a social and political movement. It served as a bridge to connect how the ideas embedded within the movement in the West influenced women’s movement in India simultaneously sparking an intellectual awakening in women’s writing in India.

Gender as a category of analysis framed by feminist criticism revealed female cultures and the many layers of feminine concerns that remain hidden within androcentric readings in the literature produced by Indian women writers. These same concerns surface in women’s writings from the North-East. Even though cultural contexts may vary and differ slightly, feminine concerns are more or less similar as all of these concerns emanate from being confined within patriarchal structures. Some of these recurring concerns are the quest for identity beyond the traditional roles of daughter, wife and mother; gender bias and discrimination perpetuated by customs and traditions; the exploitation and subjugation of female sexuality; and violence and abuse perpetrated by men.
Even though writings by women from the North-East may carry its own distinct features, the concerns of all women writers are similar and so women’s writing from the region can be posited within the bigger arena of women’s writing in India.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the feminine concerns that surface in the fiction of North-East women writers show that there is an emerging feminist consciousness. Close readings of the select texts revealed that the articulations of their concerns have recently just taken form. This is an important reason why the present study proposed that these writings may be considered as proto-feminist texts. These proto-feminist qualities include the preoccupation on education for women; expressing the need for equal status and rights for women; and challenging traditional patriarchal gender constructs.

Acknowledging that these women writers occupy a space where they are at the forefront of articulating the injustices against their gender carries massive implications. By displaying that there is a feminist concerns in their fiction, these women writers are setting precedence by questioning patriarchal constructs.

This emergent feminist consciousness is shown by the discussion in Chapter Four where the female experience of violence is investigated. Taking Elaine Showalter’s concept of gynocriticism, the chapter examined the woman as a writer and producer of textual meanings. Through the literary expressions of Temsula Ao’s These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War-Zone and Laburnum for My Head, Mitra Phukan’s The Collector’s Wife and Bijoya Sawian’s Shadowmen, the representative voice for women in situations of violence is reflected. They critique their patriarchal cultures and shed light on how the conflicts that create this violence further oppress them. These conflicts are in large part created by male power structures where women have no role in policy making that can help to improve their
conditions; moreover, in situations of conflict and violence, women’s lives are endangered, they are often subjected to brutalities and sexual violence, their mobility becomes restricted, their psyche is affected and overall their quality of life greatly diminished.

The discussion in Chapter Four involved character analysis and examining other narrative techniques such as the foreboding of dominant themes, metaphors and style of the writers that help convey the brutalities of insurgency and conflicts on women. In Ao’s narratives in These Hills and Laburnum, the depiction of female characters and the feminine psyche exemplified her deep sense of responsibility to put across a realistic picture of the suffering that women endure. Ao’s depiction illustrated that women suffer the most when violent clashes occur between insurgents and the government. Through her female characters, we see that the women’s bodies become sites for violence in situations of conflicts – women are rendered extremely vulnerable to physical brutalities, rape and sexual exploitation.

While Ao depicted the vulnerability of women, she also presented them as strong individuals who are able to hold their own when faced with life-threatening situations. Even though women are often relegated to the peripheries in terms of decision-making, Ao takes care to portray her female characters as individuals that influence the outcome of the stories through acts of bravery and sacrifice. This illustrates that Ao champions the cause of women in her works.

Her narrative style relies heavily on realism and at times can seem like a news report. This is because most of the stories in her fiction are based on actual events that occurred in the turbulent history of Nagaland’s separatist movements. She discards frivolous embellished settings in favour of inserting the reader right into the heart of the story by giving realistic depictions of events that reflect the true horror of violence caused by insurgency. Through this realistic style of narration, she skilfully depicted the fear that gun violence can incite
which is perpetuated by insurgents and counter-insurgency measures carried out by the government. She also captured the plight of the innocent civilians who are forced to appease the armed forces and the insurgents – where taking sides can have severe consequences, even death.

Phukan in *Collector’s Wife* gives an excellent picture of the feminine psyche. The feminine psyche is presented in all its shades in the novel showing the deep impressions, longings, desires and inner mysteries of the feminine mind. Such an approach taken up by Phukan serves a significant purpose – it is through the lens of the protagonist’ mind that the theme of insurgency violence in the novel is explored. The inner contemplations and thoughts of the feminine mind reveal the world of insurgents and the nature of ethnic conflicts in Assam.

Exploring the psyche of the female protagonist, Phukan depicted the visceral pain of women who lose their spouses and loved ones to the violence of insurgency. Through the protagonist, we get a glimpse of how brutal killings and kidnappings carried out by insurgents affect not only women but also their children who are witness to these violent acts and are often left traumatized. Throughout the novel, the feminine concerns that Phukan has as a writer is projected on to the psyche of the female protagonist. We see that Phukan is critical of both the perpetrators of violence and the agencies that allow the perpetrators to exist.

Phukan’s adopts a narrative style that shifts between the inner contemplations of the protagonist and the detailed descriptions of the surrounding of the novel’s setting. Phukan uses the settings skillfully to set the tone in the story and foreshadows the theme of violence through the use of imagery and symbolism.

The quality of ‘strong-rootedness’ in the region’s land is displayed by the elaborate effort taken to describe the peculiar geographical features of Assam – its plains, hills and rivers.
Lengthy descriptions of the ethnic diversity of Assam’s people also add strength to the strong bond that the writer has with her place of origin.

In Sawian’s *Shadowmen*, we see a different aspect of violence that occurs due to ethnic conflicts and xenophobic tendencies. Again, it is through the lens of a female protagonist that the intrigues of ethnic conflicts and violence especially those perpetuated on people who are not of the ethnic majority is witnessed. However, in the novel Sawian chooses not to extensively explore the characterization of her female protagonist. Instead, Sawian brings in many points-of-view from different characters which reflects the author’s desire to create an inclusive and unbiased understanding of why different groups resort to different strategies which includes the use of violence, anarchy, corruption, bribes and kidnapping to achieve their goals or in part to seek justice for what they view as injustice.

Through a disconnected style of prose writing, she manages to include thematic concerns that cover the entire spectrum of the causes of ethnic unrest and conflicts in her state of Meghalaya. Her narrative style also consists of the liberal use of the *Khasi* language in lieu of English words, and she does not provide translations of these words in the book. It is as though Sawian places the responsibility on her readers to put in the effort to research the meaning of the words thus giving visibility to cultures and ethnic groups that hardly get representation. This inclination to rely heavily on her roots reflects the writer’s desire to promote more awareness for the region and also reflects the feature of ‘strong-rootedness’ that literatures from the North-East possess.

Sawian’s novel illustrates the nature of conflicts and violence that is very specific to the region. If her novel is to be read as a social commentary of contemporary *Khasi* society, then Sawian squarely sees the declining state of her society at the cross-roads of change which can
either be good or bad. For her, conflicts, violence, and ethnic discords are perpetuated by the lack of opportunities that is created by corruption that trickles down from the upper echelons of government and the people in power. She is almost sympathetic to the cause of insurgents and rebels who according to her are most of the time just young disillusioned individuals who resort to violence and anarchy to achieve their goals.

With the different aspects of the violence that is presented in women’s fiction of the North-East studied, Chapter Four concluded that often the effects of decades of violence on the people and their psyches especially those of women remain silenced suppressed due to lack of representation. It determined that women become silent bystanders in conflicts that are not of their making and their lack of involvement in the policy making process which is generally thought of as a man’s space hinders this representation. However, women’s fiction from the region has in this capacity has taken up the mantle to give voices to these silenced experiences by mirroring the reality of the struggles and sufferings that women endure. Their narrative skills conveyed these feminine preoccupations through the masterful construction of characters and use of narrative techniques that captured effectively the realism of violence in the region. Thus, we can say that the fiction of women writers from the region accomplishes the task of being a representative voice not only for women of the North-East but the entire region as a whole.

Moving on, the discussion in Chapter Five involved examining oppression and discrimination of women perpetuated in patriarchal societies through cultural practices, customs and traditions as presented in North-East women’s fiction. The approach in the chapter used Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex and Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics theoretical deconstructions of patriarchy to analyze Easterine Kire’s A Terrible Matriarchy,
Jahnavi Barua’s *Rebirth* and “The Night” from Temsula Ao’s *These Hills called Home: Stories from a War-Zone*.

Kire’s novel explored the perpetuation of gender discrimination and oppression within the context of the Naga patriarchal society. Since this theme is the major preoccupation of the novel, the present study approached the text to see the various aspects on how discrimination and oppression towards women is caused and sustained.

Kire employed the premise of a bildungsroman in her novel to articulate the injustices that women suffer which is seen through the eyes of the young female protagonist. It is through Kire’s deep exploration of her female protagonist’ progress and growth in self-realizations, and through the character’s struggles and sufferings that we determine that gender bias in this context is present and continued due to customs and traditions that have historically given preference to males. This overt preference for males mixed with filial loyalty for the authority of elders in this particular context meant that discriminations can also be perpetuated by a female on other females as seen in novel. These gender biases are also extended to men who have to fall under these auxiliary powers that older women possess, the dynamics of which is intricately explored by Kire thus bringing awareness to different aspects of gender discriminations that occur specifically within the cultural context that she comes from.

In Barua’s *Rebirth* the analysis on the thematic preoccupation on gender oppression is continued. Through a close reading of the novel, patterns of oppression that subjugates a woman and puts her in a position of dependency is identified. It was determined that there are oppressive patterns that a woman can experience due to the traditional definitions of ‘self’ in patriarchal societies – the definition of the woman’s ‘self’ that occurs through marriage, kinship and reproduction.
Rebirth is a remarkable example of foraying into the female psyche. The narrative premise of a mother talking to her unborn child allows the reader to access the inner recesses of the character’s mind and serves as a window to see into and experience the turbulent emotions that the character feels. The female psyche that Barua presents covered a wide spectrum – she illustrated the helplessness of women in abusive relationships; the vulnerability that women experience with impending motherhood; the complex relationship between mothers and daughters; and the resilient power of women.

“The Night” by Ao is a mind-opening look into the discriminations faced by women where traditions and customs observed in a patriarchal society denies women their humanity. She brings attention to the persecutions that patriarchal constructs of culture impose on women who are deemed as promiscuous for having children outside of marriage while men who are also equally responsible do not suffer the same retributions.

Ao takes care to include the traditional customs and practices of the particular culture that she is critiquing in her narrative setting so that the reader can contextualize the nature of discriminatory attitudes that women encounter. Through the female protagonist, Ao depicted the hereditary nature of discrimination against females is continued as children of the so called ‘loose’ women inherit her reputation. Her bad name not only tarnishes her children, but her entire family.

This thematic preoccupation in the story also raised many questions on how female sexuality is constructed and perceived in a patriarchy. The female sexuality is seen as impure and subjected to judgements while the male sexuality is not questioned.

Through the discussions that were initiated in Chapter 5, the present study reached the conclusions that traditions and customs practiced within patriarchal societies are extremely limiting for women. The thematic preoccupations of the women authors reflect their concern
to question the validity of patriarchal constructs that suppress women and also reflect the feminist concerns that is present in their fiction.

It is valid observation at this point that a literary tradition of writings in English is emerging from the region and the large contribution of women writers to this phenomenon is an encouraging development. The present study brought attention to this development through its critical analysis of select works of fiction that gave special attention to investigate pertinent feminine preoccupations.

The thesis is by no means an exhaustive study of women’s writing from the region. It should be noted that there is always scope for multiple perspectives; the scope of which is limitless and the possibilities that the select texts offers for critical considerations are many indeed. The present study is a humble attempt to examine some aspects of the writings of women from the North-East and as such should not be considered as an axiom for future critical readings.

A closing remark is that a feminist reading of women’s writing in English from the North-East revealed that there is a budding female literary tradition. The emergence of a feminist consciousness that is expressed through the fictional representations presented in their writings is worthy of attention and significant for further critical studies. Their writings as mentioned in preceding chapters, can stand as ‘genesis’ texts for a literary tradition that can validly carry the implications of being termed as ‘Women’s Writing of the North-East’ which can add to the richness and complexity of Women’s Writing in English in India.