Introduction

Problem of the Study

Cultural constructs in patriarchal societies have confined women to predefined identities, conditioning their consciousness to remain subordinated and oppressed. This desire to connect with the ‘self’ and access her denied subjectivity is often articulated in women’s writing and is also evident in the writings of women from North-East India. This study investigates the female experience that remains suppressed in androcentric cultures by conducting a feminist reading of the violence, oppression and discrimination present in the fiction of women writers of the North-East. In doing so, the study attempts to establish that there is an emergent feminist consciousness that women writers of the region exhibited through their writings.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study is to focus primarily on the fiction of women writers of the North-East by looking into the subjectivity and experience that women encounter in terms of violence, oppression and discrimination that is articulated through the characters, psyche, narrative styles and techniques presented in their writings. For this reason, primary texts have been chosen with thematic commonalities that closely reflect the aspects that the research will attempt to study. Though women’s writing from the region covers a wide microcosm of subject matter and issues that are pertinent and peculiar to the region, the present study will only concentrate on the aspects aforementioned.

The limitation that the study sets is mainly to concentrate on texts which are originally written in English by contemporary women writers and have chosen not to include fiction that have been written in regional languages and translated works. It is important to note that while there are many women writers of notable repute from the region like Indira Goswami
whose works can encompass the discussions that appear in the thesis, given the direction where the research aims to focus on, her fiction has not be included in the discussions of the thesis.

Also, the discussion in chapter four primarily rests on the female experience of violence that is voiced in the fiction of women writers of the North-East. For the present study, only women writers of fiction from the states of Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya have been chosen to illustrate the nature and politics of conflicts and the violence that it breeds. The reasons for exclusion of women writers from the remaining states is that even though Manipur is a politically volatile state, contemporary fiction writing in English by women (even though there are many fiction that are written in the regional language on the subject matter discussed) is yet to make a mark and hence a reason for its exclusion. The same reason applies to writings that have not yet emerged from women writers in Tripura, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh with the exception of Mamang Dai’s Black Hill (2014) which features conflicts based on ethnic divides from the colonial period but the scope of the present study is to cover only current on-going conflicts. Substantial fiction writing in English by women on violence has not emerged from Mizoram women writers with the exception of Jacob’s Zorami (2015). This book, however, has not been included because the present study will focus on fiction that has emerged from on-going active zones of conflicts and violence.

**Purpose of the Study**

A legitimate question that this study asks is whether the fiction of women writers from the region necessitates a feminist reading? Women inhabit silenced and oppressed spaces within the confining external and internal prisons that come with living in patriarchal societies. The female experience is muted and suppressed, and representation is often denied to them. This reason is a determining factor that answers why women’s writings from the region are crucial to examine as suppressed voices and experiences can emerge from the reading of their
fiction. With this in mind, this thesis sets out to analyze the works of women writers of the
North-East from a feminist perspective and search out the feminist aspects that can be
interpreted from their fiction.

For the purpose of the study, this thesis will analyze the following women authors and their
select fiction which comprises of both novels and short stories:

(i) Temsula Ao – *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War-Zone* and
    *Laburnum for My Head Stories*

(ii) Mitra Phukan – *The Collector’s Wife*

(iii) Bijoya Sawian – *Shadow Men*

(iv) Easterine Kire – *A Terrible Matriarchy*

(v) Jahnavi Barua – *Rebirth*

The primary texts which the researcher has chosen have a shared commonality and will
address some pertinent feminine voices and consciousness that is expressed in the select
works.

**Hypothesis**

Specifically looking at women writers from the region, their writings one could say carries a
heavy burden and produces more complex alternative meanings in its textual readings as it
comes from a place of subjective existence and perspectives of women who are writing from
within patriarchal structures, something which male writers are not burdened with.

The researcher’s argument in carrying out a close reading of the select works of fiction
through the lens of feminism and various feminist theories is to venture and substantiate the
premise of the thesis, which is as follows:

i. The following primary texts by women writers have a shared commonality. As first
generation writers in English and as writers that stem from a region that has a distinct
North-Eastern(ress) to it which surfaces in the fiction of these woman writers. The
violence caused by occupation and insurgency is a shared commonality and is an intrinsic characteristic of fiction writing from the region.

ii. The select texts do not have an overt feminist agenda. But it does possess ‘feminine sentiments’ and there is an underlying ‘feminist consciousness’ in addressing gender discriminations, gender relations and patriarchal oppressions.

**Significance of the Study**

Writings from the region embody layers of complexities as the region is an amalgamation of multiethnic and multilingual cultures confined within a space that remains isolated from the rest of India largely due to its geographical location. Being a very diverse region of India with the presence of many cultures, ethnicities, traditions, customs and languages, the region has been fraught with conflicts and violence witnessing many separatist movements since the formation of the states that make up the region. This adds to the feelings of separateness and alienation from the rest of the country. This very feeling of isolation has also translated into the literature of the region which has often been neglected.

Contemporary North-East writers today articulate their concerns in their fiction, short stories, poetry and prose and in a way act as social activists by talking about these issues that pertinently seeks solutions and answers. Writers capture through their nuanced representations the troubles that arise at a critical juncture when modernization has caused upheavals in the observation of customs and traditions; societies have been inflicted with the problems of conflicts and violence that has become synonymous with the name of the region; identity problems and politics that cause alienation and isolation; writers from the North-East have served the purpose of giving a voice to silenced experiences that otherwise would not have been heard.

The significance of the study is that it will bring greater visibility to women’s writing of the North-East. Women all over the world face concerns and issues that they experience existing
within patriarchal structures which is often articulated in their writings. Often the female
erperience is silenced and muted. The women writer in the North-East more or less
experiences the same concerns as their counterparts across the world. However, being from a
region that is conflict-ridden and witness to violent secessionist movements, the isolation of
the region hinders the visibility that is often given to men. By focusing on women writers and
their fiction, the study will attempt to give exposure to the body of literature written by
contemporary women writers and the female experience that is articulated through their
narratives.

**Literature Review**

It must be stated at the outset of this study that to the knowledge of the researcher, full-
fledged studies on the select fiction and authors from a feminist perspective have not been
attempted so far as a tradition of English Writing from the region is still in its nascent stages.
Critical studies on women’s writing especially in the genre of fiction are lacking. However,
there are a handful of anthologies that feature a compilation of essays that address some of
the aspects of women’s writing of the North-East that is relevant to the present study. Where
critical works are sparse, the study has been supplemented with research papers and articles
that have been published in journals and online journals and also from dissertations that are
related to the area of research that the study has undertaken.

A helpful book which can be considered as an introductory text in studying literature of the
North-East is Tilottoma Misra’s *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India:*
*Poetry and Essays* (2011). The Introduction provided by Misra gives a brief yet concise
summary of how literature from the region has undergone different phases of evolution and
succinctly touches upon the dominant themes that emerge in the region’s contemporary
literature. This introduction is an excellent piece that equips the reader on how to approach
literature that is emerging from the region. The compilation of essays in the book contains
topics that range from socio-cultural studies as well as analytical pieces that specifically focus on particular ethnic or linguistic groups of the North-East. However, the book’s broad spectrum of themes does not provide substantial material on women’s writing of the region and its premise is too narrow to accommodate a full-length study relating to gender issues. The book, at its best, offers valuable information as an introductory prism on the variety of literatures from the region and in this respect it is an excellent starting-point for readers and researchers alike.

Another anthology which contributes to extending knowledge about the literature from the region is a book entitled *Emerging Literatures from North-East India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity* (2013) edited by Margaret Ch. Zama. Again, given the cultural diversity of the region, the book contains fifteen articles that cover a wide area of topics that include theoretical and historical perspectives on socio-political and cultural issues that are pertinently specific to the literature emerging from the North-East. Even though topics in the book vary immensely, it provides critical analysis and study on the discourses that are emerging from an unassuming region. Although the approach of the book orients more towards socio-cultural-political perspectives, it gives a critical appraisal of the region’s literature and the paradigms that can emerge from these discourses.

Since the thesis is confined to contemporary women’s fiction of the North-East, the dismal lack of critical studies on the said discussion is a great handicap for scholars and researchers. A book which helps to fill in this gap is *The Peripheral Centre: Voices from India’s North-East* (2013), edited by Preeti Gill. The book is a collection of essays and articles that predominantly focuses on the condition of women in the region and the effects of conflicts and violence caused by geo-political instabilities on the women of the North-East. In providing different perspectives on the political violence of the region on women by several writers and journalists, the book gives valuable information that can supplement other critical
understanding and discussions on discourses related to the North-East. The book is also a comprehensive study that unveils different aspects of the various ethnic societies, their traditions and practices that contribute to women’s subjugated position in the region with some essays and articles looking specifically at particular ethnic groups. The inclusion of interview transcripts provides immense insights into the lives of women living in the shadow of violence from insurgency and counter-insurgency.

*Search for Peace with Justice: Issues Around Conflicts in Northeast India* (2008), a sociological research study edited by Walter Fernandes furnishes perceptive discussions on nature of conflicts in the region. The book features a compilation of essays resting primarily on the theme of conflicts and dissects the various aspects and causes of it. In particular, the essays “Conflicts amid the Historical Experiences of Identity, Nation and the State in North Eastern India” by M.N. Karna and “Ethnic Tension and Conflicts: North Eastern Experiences” by Lucy Zehol gives a comprehensive understanding of the historical experiences that highlights the complex nature of conflicts in the region. These essays provide important theoretical and historical background information which greatly supplements critical studies of fiction that has these issues as its thematic concerns.

Ashley Telli’s paper entitled “Doubly displaced: Theoretical reflections of the terms ‘tribe’, ‘gender’ and ‘minority’ in Northeastern Women’s Writing” in *Biblio: A Review of Books* (2008), renders a very important critical discussion by positing women’s writing from the region as ‘doubly’ minoritized and marginalized. By theoretically framing women’s writing of the North-East in the category of a minority, Tellis, strengthens the argument that more representation is necessary and boldly insinuates that women’s writing can carry the weight of representing the region.

A book that solely focuses on the literature from Nagaland is *Critical Essays on Naga Poets and Fiction Writers in English* (2016) by A.J. Sebastian. The book carries critical discussions
on select poems and fiction by contemporary writers in English. The essay “Matriarchal Hegemony in Easterine Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy*” in the book is important to note as it is relevant to the present study. Critically, the essay carries some feminine concerns and highlights some examples of gender discrimination. However, it is mainly a concise summary of the novel and studies interpersonal relationships among characters as its major concern.

Through this survey, an idea of the important aspects of literature from the region and the various thematic concerns emerges. The scarcity of critical studies shows that the emerging trend of writing in English from the region is fairly new and that there is lack of awareness and representation of the region’s literature that contributes to the deficiency of critical works. With this in mind, it is safe to state that full-length feminist studies on the fiction of North-East women writers are just beginning.

**Research Methodology**

By orienting the nature of the present study as a feminist reading of select fiction, the framework chosen to analyze the works of the said women writers have included some prominent feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Judith Butler and Elaine Showalter. The inclination to employ a specific school of feminist criticism in the application of studying the texts has been discarded in favour of reading the texts critically from a feminist perspective that accommodates a broad range of thoughts and schools from the feminist criticism tradition.

Since the study focuses on female experience as its primary aim which is to identify an emergent feminist consciousness in the fiction of North-East women writers, Showalter’s formulation of gynocriticism is applied to read the texts from a feminist critical viewpoint which will allow the uncovering of nuances and meanings often ignored and overlooked in androcentric readings of women’s literature.
Beauvoir and Millett’s critical texts on identifying patriarchy as the source of women’s oppression and subordinated position is taken up to bring to light the underlying voice of the women writer to critique the marginalized and subjugated status of women presented in their fictions.

**Chapterization**

The reach of this study will be covered in six chapters.

**Chapter One** will build a background study of the peculiarities of literature emerging from the region by encapsulating the unique geo-political space that literature from the region occupies. This is done by investigating the history of literatures that encompasses the eight states that today make up the region. It covers the pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary literature.

**Chapter Two** focuses on the influence of feminism as a movement that sparked the rise of feminist criticism that had led to critically evaluating and analyzing the literary works of women across the world and how the concept of developing a female-centric study of literature has influenced the writings of women in India.

**Chapter Three** furthers the ideas of feminist criticism that is laid in the preceding chapter by connecting the importance of studying the literature and specifically of fiction by women by North-East women writers to suggest that a feminist consciousness is evident in their works. In order to substantiate this idea, critical feminist theories are applied to reveal certain nuances and aspects present in the fiction of women writers of the region.

**Chapter Four** will focus on the experience of violence caused by political and ethnic conflicts which is articulated by contemporary women writers of the North-East in their fiction – a space which is often silenced and muted due to androcentric readings that fail to uncover the nuanced expressions that can only surface through a woman-centric study. It will discuss the female experience of violence particularly the violence that is intrinsically linked
with the ethnic and geo-political instabilities of the region by examining the characters, narrative styles and techniques used by women authors to express these concerns.

**Chapter Five** will concentrate on the oppression and discrimination of women within patriarchal structures articulated in the fiction of women writers of the North-East. Through fictional representations investigating this aspect of women’s condition in and within patriarchal structures, the spectrum of discriminatory and oppressive attitudes towards women in particular the patriarchal societies of the North-East are revealed.

**Chapter Six** will encapsulate the arguments that have been built in the preceding chapters by tying in the discussions provided in each chapter and reiterate the important points that the thesis has put forward.