

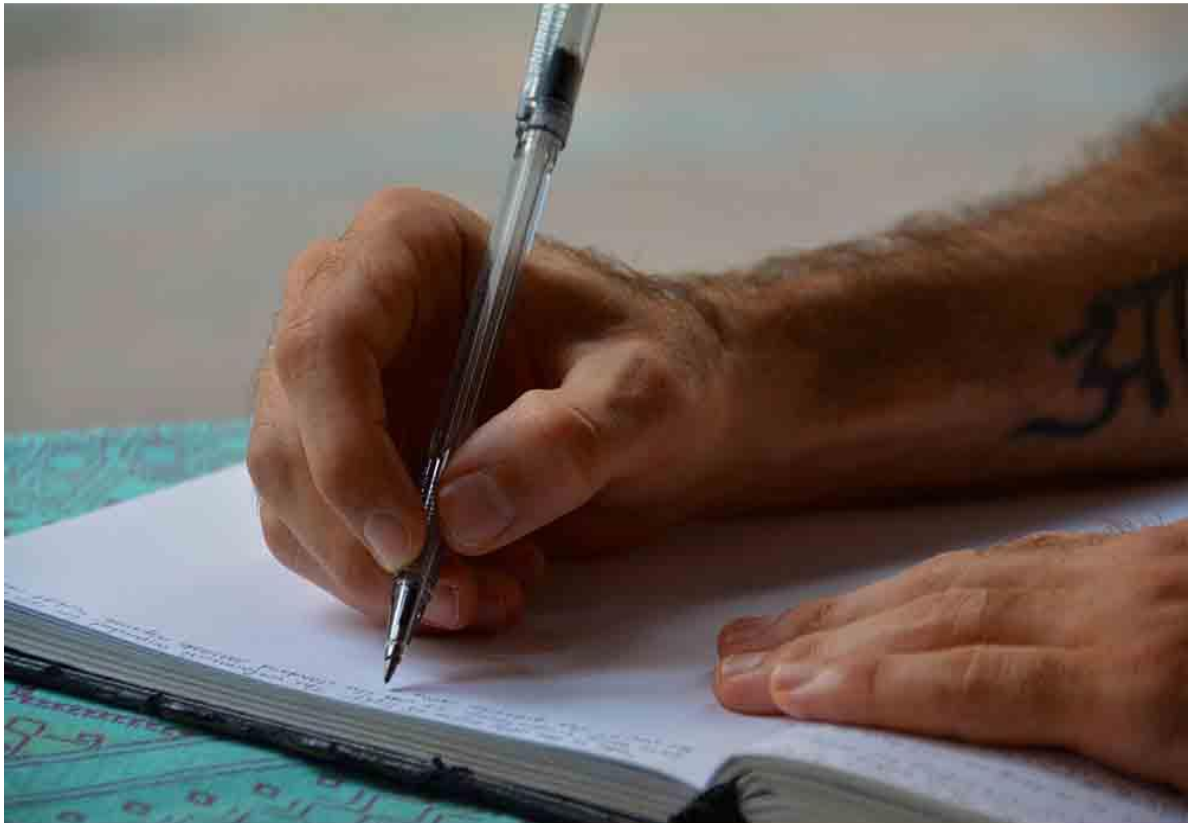
**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Rashmita Devi

M.A in English

Assam Women's University, Jorhat, Assam India

devirashmita2@gmail.com

## Exploring the Dominant Themes in Contemporary North-East Indian English Poetry: A

### Detailed Analysis of Selected Poems

#### Abstract

As North-East India is full of different ethnic and religious groups having diverse cultures, customs, traditions and beliefs, the literature produced from the region is highly influenced by these aspects. Therefore, the literature emerged in the region is inspired by the clash of cultures, sense of cultural loss and its recovery because of the insurgent activities taken place in the land in the name of ethnicity, language etc. The issues of continuing immigrant migration, the quest for identity, betrayal in terms of political equality, injustice, negligence, cultural imagination, culture and tradition Vs modernity, nature and ecology, violence perpetrated by various militant outfits etc. are some of the dominant themes found in the contemporary poetry that is produced from North-East India. In this paper those themes will be manifested by concentrating on select poems, either written in English or their English translations, by the poets from North-East India.

Keywords: North-East India, diverse cultures, identity, injustice, modernity.

The term North-East India --- or simply the North-east--- obviously refers to the geographical location of the region. But there are many other ways in which the term holds

great significance.<sup>1</sup> The North-Eastern region is itself unique in terms of its „special character“<sup>2</sup>; i.e. the character of being assimilated socially and culturally. This setting of the region which has been continuing from the past distinguishes it from the rest of India. Therefore, the literature emerged from the region is also different from the literature produced in other parts of the country as Tilottoma Misra in her introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* states, “An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with „other“ cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the seven north-eastern states.” (Misra, xviii) The clash of various cultures and the adaptation of other cultural values often led towards the loss of tradition and also threaten the existing cultures. These issues are well portrayed in the contemporary English poetry that has been produced from the states of the North-East. Although not all the states are equally progressed in producing a large harvest of good poetry, yet the productions and translations are reasonably satisfying.<sup>3</sup> The themes like question of cultural identity, sense of historical and cultural loss, clash between tradition and modernity, idea of homeland, love for one’s own land, deprivation and injustice done to North-Eastern people by the mainstream society, identity politics, nature and ecology, women and nature, tradition of oral narratives etc. are recurrent in the poetry produced from the region. In short, the poetry in English from North-East India presents the view of mountains, hills, rivers, culture and tradition and multi-ethnic groups of the region.

In this paper, five poems, either written or translated into English, by five different poets from Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland respectively have been selected for discussion. The poems selected for the study will attempt to provide a glimpse into the variety of concerns that have been found in the English writings from North-East India through a detailed analysis of the poems by keeping the

aforementioned themes as the major concern.

As mentioned earlier, as the entire region of North- East India is diverse in terms of its culture and its habitants, so the communities of the region are concerned about their own cultures and attempt to preserve those in anyway. Therefore the issue of cultural identity has also been the dominant theme of poetry produced from this part of India. The poet from

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<sup>1</sup> Birendranath Datta, N.C. Sharma, P.C. Das (eds), *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India* (1994), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase has been used by Birendranath Datta in his essay “North-East India and Its Socio-Cultural Milieu” to refer to the socio-cultural milieu of the region.

<sup>3</sup> Tilottoma Misra (ed), *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays* (2011), p. xxi.

Assam, Aruni Kashyap's "Me" is the perfect poetic product that raises the issue of cultural identity of North-Eastern people.

The very opening lines of the poem, "Me" sets forth strongly the identity of the poet. Since the people of North-East India have always been neglected by the mainstream Indian society, neither the region nor the contribution of its people to the culture and civilization of India has received adequate notice, much less appreciation,<sup>4</sup> as stated by Birendranath Datta in his essay "North-East India and Its Socio-Cultural Milieu", Kashyap also, with simple language, without any kind of exaggeration, states, "Even I have words,/ I can clay- mould them/ I have languages, literatures/ forest songs." (Misra, 32) His strong relationship with his own culture can be seen while he declares that he also has language and literature and has his own stories to tell. Even the title itself provides an idea that the poem is about the identity of the poet. But while going through the poem, it becomes clear that the poem is not at all about the poet himself but rather the identity of the people of Assam that is rooted culturally.

Most of the communities from north-east India can pride themselves for possessing a vibrant storytelling tradition.<sup>5</sup> The tradition of storytelling is vigorous among the Assamese too. As those oral narratives work as lens to view the old storytelling tradition common to all aboriginal people, Kashyap asserts that his place is rich in its folk culture since the oral literatures have been crawling from generation to generation having long histories. These oral literatures or folk tales have been circulated by grandmothers and this culture of storytelling by chewing betel-nuts and sitting on the courtyards in full moon nights is unique in its own sense. The poet says, "Grandmas circulated them; with betel nuts/ on courtyards under honeyed moons," (Misra, 32) The betel-nuts are the most essential part of Assamese

life and these are symbolic of hospitality in Assamese culture; people offer betel nuts to show their respect and warmth towards others.

Employing several images collected from the nature world, the poet clearly shows the ancient culture of the Assamese people which are still prevalent more or less. The images like

„honeyed moon“, „rains“ are used to convey the story-telling culture of the people. Again with the image of „seasons“ and „mists“ Kashyap shows the eternity of this culture, although time has been changed. He writes, “Stories of new- born speaking from backyard graves/ About dogs transforming into man/ Man to sheep, goats/ And a girl, singing through lime trees,/

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

gourds and lilies from backyards.” (Misra, 33) This is a reference to the popular Assamese folk-tales that have been spreading their fragrance from generation to generation.

By employing various symbols collected from both nature as well as materialistic world, Kashyap present the picture of Assamese folk culture. The symbol of „tunes“ refers to the harvest festival, Bihu which have different folk songs to convey its importance. Similarly

„spring birds“ are symbolic of new generation or birth. The spring is called the season of new life and the cuckoo bird spreads the news of new season and of Bihu.

Kashyap also uses enjambments in the poem to give the voice more weight. He writes, “My history is different, defined/ by grandmas, rivers, hills,/ singing spring birds behind green trees/ and seventeen victories.” (Misra, 32) This implies clearly that although in the mainstream literature the history of Assam is not included, the popular culture of story- telling is the medium to spread it. Further he also gives equal importance to the tea cultivation culture of Assam. He writes, “The way tea- leaves run in my veins/ instead of blood.” Misra, 32) This clearly signifies how the people of Assam are culturally interlinked with the tea cultivation because Assam is mainly known for its tea cultivation.

Furthermore, the theme of ignorance by the mainstream Indian society is also dominant in the poem when the poet pleads the mainstream India to accept him as a part of it and asks for a warm embrace. He writes, “And I still wait, for a warm embrace” (Misra, 33).

Poetry of North-East India is by and large entrenched in identity politics.<sup>6</sup> There is often noticed a quest for identity in contemporary North-Eastern English poetry. Cherrie L. Chhange, a poet from Mizoram, raises the issues like avoidance, deprivation and injustice done to North-Eastern people by the mainstream society where the voices of

the people of the region are seldom heard and barely finds mention in mainstream oriented studies of literature and hardly ever discussed. Her poem titled, “What does an Indian Look Like” is one among such poems dealing with the theme of injustice done to the North-East Indians and their quest for identity.

By shedding lights on the aspect of minoritarian North-East condition in the context of India, Cherrie L. Chhange challenges the very notion of India and celebrates the diversity of the land. The poet points out the in-between existence of North-East India where national

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<sup>6</sup> V. Lalengkimi, “Re-Defining the Self: A Perspective on Writings from North-East India”, *International Journal of English Language and Literature* (2017), p. 296.

inclusion of these states is sometimes earned through the nullification of their individual ethnic identity.<sup>7</sup> The tourist brochures are the references to the advertisements of tourism of North-East India which plays an important role in strengthening the economy of the nation through its „colourful and vibrant“ existence. The appearance of the people of the region is compared to „a veritable Benetton ad“ with their interesting faces having small eyes and height, their own traditional attires and hues and cries: Chhange exposes the shallowness of the attempt to portray India, where diversity is celebrated but it lacks unity and by bringing this issue she questions the political realm: “Are we as proud of our unity/ As we are of our diversity?” (Misra, 76)

The poetess then goes on questioning the very notion of India as the „largest democracy in the world“ and asserts the presence of the deprived people of the region whose existence is seldom acknowledged. This concept of democracy is only fit in theory and she criticizes the political leaders who deny the fact that something mainstream exists: “For those who, in a land that profess/ To deny the presence of a mainstream” (Misra, 76) This causes the people of the region to lead insurgent activities and they try hard to come out of this „minority“ status „in a majority world“.

Further drawing attention to her physical appearances, her language and her ethnicity, she openly brings the issue of deprivation since these features are antithetical to the concept of who an Indian is or should look like: “You look at me, and you see/ My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith.” (Misra, 76) By voicing the experiences of the North-Eastern people being taunted and mocked for their language and looks in the metropolitan cities, Chhange urges them to cut the past and analyse the present of her

and not to deprive her of being included as a part of them only because of her ethnic identity. At last she declares that no one among them can really answer to the question what an Indian really looks like and asserts her identity by declaring that “An Indian looks like me, an Indian is me.” (Misra, 76)

The poem, “The Conquest” (translated from Khasi into English), by Desmond Kharmawphlang celebrates the cultural imagination of the speaker along with the theme of homeland. The poet’s love for his homeland and his concern for his own culture which has undergone tremendous changes has been clearly presented in the poem. The concept of „unity in diversity“ in the region is also made visible by the poet.

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<sup>7</sup> Amrita Bhattacharya, “An Ecocritical Reading of Select North-East Indian English Poetry”, *Literary Herald* (2017), p. 968.

In the very first stanza of the poem, the poet's description of his homeland, i.e. Meghalaya has been clearly visualized. Revealing his love for his hometown, the speaker says, "I never get tired of talking about my/ Hometown." (Misra, 61) The mesmerizing natural beauty of the place is one of the reasons that makes him love his place so deeply. The summer sky pregnant with unborn rain refers to geographical phenomenon of the region because due to monsoon winds, the summer season is full of rain. Again the speaker goes on describing the beauty of the land: "Winter arrives, with a tepid sun/ Touching the frozen hills, the dream-/ Boats on lakes." (Misra, 61) It is the winter during which season the beauty of the place gets doubled. The frozen hills with the rays of sun which is neither warm nor cold and the different beautiful lakes make everyone mesmerized.

Going back to the days of past life of the people of his land, Kharmawphlang imagines and brings the ancient culture of trading with Surma (now Bangladesh). In that period, people travelled from place to place for the purpose of trade and brought women to home for nurturing their children.

Again by bringing the issue of colonialism, Kharmawphlang raises the issue of religion. With the advent of the British, civilization came to the place but according to the poet, this civilization brought a great change to the place in terms of religion and culture since the ignorant aboriginal indigenous people converted themselves into Christianity avoiding their own tradition and breaking the uniformity and communal feeling and therefore, the trading culture had also been brought to an end. Here, a deep sense of cultural loss has been shared by the poet that came with the conquest of the land as well as the mind of the people by the colonizers. The line reflects the conflict of culture and religion: "Later came the British/ With gifts of bullets, blood-money/ And religion" (Misra, 62) There is further reference to the insurgencies taken place in the land

when the poet writes, “A steady conquest to the sound of/ Guns began” (Misra, 62) Although there was no peace during the colonial period, the present scenario is somewhat different from that as the “bruished children” of the land, although having different identity, have made the land a “metropolitan city” because the people are so diverse and coping with this diversity they still love the land and thus proving the „unity in diversity“.

The progressive thoughts and views as the requirement of contemporary time are also cherished by the North-Eastern poets. Another poet from Meghalaya, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s “Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree Their Sons’ Choices of Women”

(translated from Khasi into English) is such a poem dealing with the dilemma of a modern man to choose his woman for an inter-community marriage emphasizing such progressive thoughts. In this sense the poem is about the clash between tradition and modernity; how the tribal people are not completely able to accept the coming of modernity to their communal traditions and customs is the main theme in the poem.

From the very beginning, the attitude of the poet is seen radical as he goes on advocating on behalf of the sons who defy the choices of women for them. Considering his beloved to „an object of scorn“ for the community people, he is seen against the stereotypical norms of choosing a woman for marriage within the same community as he wants to select his bride himself. Although this decision would bring the sons difficulties to manage his love and incite the mothers“ anger as depicted in the first stanza: “For managng to love/ an object of scorn,/ they place around my neck/ a garland of threats” ([www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com)) but the poet is ready to go against stereotypes despite those threats.

Further the son“s ignorance through „sewn shut-ears“ to the talking and lectures of the mothers and their staring at the woman of his choice prove that he no longer is captive in such false traditions and rituals when he declares: “And the world is cold this winter,” ([www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com)) which refers to the abnegation of his old age custom and by breaking this law he urges the mothers to embrace modern thoughts and ways. By showing no remorse to his act of going against his community law, the son celebrates his love and considers it a festival. By pledging his mother to shower blessings on them, the son wants his mother let them love and live according to their own will and wants her not to be a barrier between them in the name of custom and tradition: “Leave cherries to winter, mother,/ love to seasoned lovers.” ([www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com))

There has been a conscious use of ecology in the works of the poets from North-East India as a means for an assertion of identity. A reading of the well known poet from

Nagaland, Monalisa Changkija's poems makes us feel an ecofeministic favour and hear an ecofeministic tone. Her poem titled "Mist over Brahmaputra" can be studied from this angle where ecology has become the dominant theme in the poem since she celebrates the unbreakable bond of women with nature.

By constantly comparing herself with the mighty Brahmaputra, Changkija shows her deepest concern about nature and thus nature and women become synonymous in the poem. She writes, "I flow with the currents/ And coherence of Brahma's son,/ Sometimes filthy with

human inadequacies/ Other times chaste in spiritual serenity.” (Misra, 88) This is indicative of the nature of women. Just like the mighty river, the poetess herself flow with her own thoughts and feelings; she is, like the river, sometimes considered as not having any importance and value like filth because of „human inadequacies“ i.e. lack of knowledge. But again sometimes she is pure and chaste having spiritual harmony just like the river.

Being representative of womenfolk as another version of nature, Changkija says that the river sometimes is seen very calm and spiritual and sometimes it becomes violent. Her description of the river is clearly the evidence of women’s dynamic nature. Breathing the same breathe like Brahma’s son, she also has perseverance to get transformed into different forms. Like the river, women also have the ability to take different kinds of shapes, colours and volumes in any circumstance. If she can be the symbol of uniformity, she can also break herself like the river. Here, Changkija brings the issue of politics of patriarchy which demands that women should be like water; calm and serene. But Changkija’s description of herself by shaping into various forms and shapes is a reference to history that since the river belongs to history, it is “untouched and unscarred by time, space and the elements.” (Misra, 88)

While going with the solitary side of her own self, she speaks about self-destruction, strength and power which she has like the old river: “I will myself to emulate Brahma’s Son/ To celebrate the sights, scents and sounds/ And the strength in my solitary self,/ And allow time to heal/ These self-destructive tendencies/ That sometimes buzz around my head,/ As they do over Brahma’s Son.” (Misra, 89) By describing the river and comparing herself with it, she is allowing the readers to get acquainted with the dynamic force, strength and power of women that they nurture within themselves. The destructive nature of the river is seen when flood comes destroying everything in a huge amount. Her

self-destruction is the same as that of the river Brahmaputra.

The ending of the poem shows the optimistic views of the poetess as the ray of hope for a new beginning is urged. The poetess hopes for a new beginning that the sun will appear and the fog will then get dried up over the mighty Brahmaputra and there will be a clear day. With this positive attitude Changkija hopes that there will be a new life for womenfolk in this patriarchal society and they will be given equal importance and value. She writes, "And like Brahma's Son, I wait/ For the serenades of the Sun,/ To soak up the over Brahmaputra." (Misra, 89)

To conclude the discussion, it is to be said that these five poets discussed in the paper, Aruni Kashyap from Assam, Cherrie L. Chhangte from Mizoram, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih from Meghalaya and Monalisa Changkija from Nagaland, cannot represent the myriad poetry produced from the region. But these poets chronicle the concerns and variety of modes on the relevant issues faced by the people of the region. The real picture of the land and people, as presented through vibrant themes in the poems, shows the deepest concern and love of the poets for their land and community people. In short, the thematic concerns of the poets attempt to give a distinct identity and to do justice to the diverse poetry coming from the region.

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