

Lines On The Sand: An Exploration Of Peripherality And Ambiguity In 'North-East' Indian English Literature

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Abstract –

Indian English Literature is, in its core definition, literature of India. However, even after 77 years of Independence, we are barely able to agree on what incorporates India and Indian English literature. Even today, thinking about Indian English literature brings into mind, writers like R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. The mainland India has, for a long period of time, considered the 'North-East' as a 'frontier', in almost every aspect of existence- be it social, political, cultural, economic and others. Therefore, it is no surprise that literatures from the region are still considered as what one might call literatures of the 'minority' or 'new' literatures. Much of the literary output from the region is categorised into a separate space in academic circles, by the name of 'North East India Studies'. It is only recently that Indian English literature has begun to accept literary outputs from the regions as a part of itself. Even then, contestations exist, so as to whether it should be a separate entity or be conglomerated within the gambit of Indian English Literature. This paper aims to explore the themes of peripherality and ambiguity expressed in literatures from the region. The unique location and the presence of numerous international borders in the 'North-East' gives its literary output an extremely nuanced understanding of the nebulous nature of a political entity like India. Literatures from the 'North-East' present an extremely delicate as well as in-depth understanding of what life in a 'shatter-zone' might be like. This is a perspective which is extremely unique within the confines of what the conventional understanding of Indian English Literature presents.

Keywords- 'North-East', peripherality, ambiguity, borders, Indian English Literature

Date of Submission: 26-07-2026

Date of Acceptance: 06-08-2026

Indian English Literature has moved a long way away from *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: A Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India, While in the Service of The Honourable The East India Company, Written by Himself, In a Series of Letters to a Friend*. Published in 1794 in Cork, Ireland, the work was the first text composed in English by a person of Indian origin. English has vacillated between being a tool wherewith one could assimilate into the English life, as is the case with the aforementioned book, and served as a tool of resistance, in the multicultural and multilingual landscape of the Indian topography. The Indian English literature, as we know it, presently encompasses a wide range of novels, short stories, poetry and even digital comics, with writers of national and International acclaim. However, somewhere along the lines, it is still constringent within certain parameters, beyond which the aforementioned term rarely tries to venture. The 'North-East' of India rarely finds mention in the annals of anthologies documenting the rise and emergence of English literature in India. Even if it does, it finds itself categorised with keywords like 'political', 'insurgency'. It is understood that the literary corpus from the 'North-East' extends well beyond these keywords, and yet adds on its own distinct flavour to the larger cornucopia of Indian English Literature. This paper aims to look into themes of peripherality and ambiguity that finds expression in the literatures from the region.

The idea of the Indian nation, has for a very long time, not extended itself beyond the reaches of the 20-22km long stretch of land called the Siliguri corridor, which makes up only 2% of the landmass of India. It is surrounded nearly 98% by international borders of China, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. 'North-East' as it is known, still finds itself escaping the imagination of the Indian citizen who live in the mainland. It is almost as if even the educated Indian citizen, well versed in the socio-political history of the country, often forgets that the region has eight states, complete with an extensive socio-political and cultural history and traditions. India's 'North-East' covers an area of 2,62,179 square kilometres, constituting 7.9% of India's total geographical areas. It is a home of 39 million people, constituting about 3.8% of India's population. (Gogoi). The fact that the region is extremely diverse in its culture, traditions, socio-political structures, literatures is often overlooked. Thongkolal Haokip in his article "Conceptualising Northeast India: A Discursive Analysis on Diversity" understands that the mainland India perceives the region as 'a culturally homogenous region of mongoloid races'. It, as he emphasises, is inhabited by a mosaic of societies characterised by diversity in ethnicity, language, culture, religion, social organisation, economic pursuits, productive relations and

participation in the political process. (Haokip). The diversity in the region led B.G. Verghese to call the region “another India, the most diverse part of a most diverse country, very different, relatively little known and certainly not too well understood, once a coy but now turbulent and in transition within the Indian transition”. (Verghese). The diversity in the region has been rarely understood, ever since the colonial times. An inability to understand the socio-political and cultural interconnections and relationships within the extremely multicultural and multilingual landscape of the region, by both the colonial masters and later, the Indian government, led to a mere conglomeration of the disparate ethnic communities within sharply enclosed political entities in the form of states. The enforcement of common political boundaries on communities who could not be more disparate from one another, has led to differences in opinions regarding ethnicity, identity and belonging in the region. This has exacerbated under the militaristic rule of Indian Army in the form of the AESPA Act 1972. AESPA Act allowed the Indian Army to force entry into any establishment in the ‘North East’, arrest anyone without a warrant. The employment of such a brutal act in a region already rife with violence and rife with the memory of trauma, created more distance between the people and the central government. People who had lived in relative harmony in the region, despite the cultural, linguistic and social barriers were suddenly forced to negotiate their existence with the socio-political and cultural matrix of the greater India, which did not try make space for the complex diversities of the people from the region. There was a deliberate attempt to gloss over the problems of the ethnic communities that existed there, clumping them together into categories that did not address or take into account, the disparateness and the uniqueness of the communities which had been so unceremoniously lumped together.

English literature in India has its roots in colonial British India. The establishment of the Fort William College and the Serampore Mission Press in the year 1800 kickstarted the entry of English into the Indian linguistic landscape. Since then, it has somehow transformed itself from a language enforced by the British to maintain their control over the subcontinent to being called one of the ‘Indian languages’ by Aijaz Ahmed. The journey of English from a colonial product, left behind by the British to one of our own, is in itself fraught with complexities of its own. English in India exists on the precipice of being considered a ‘foreigner’s language’ and ‘our own’. In the hugely diverse multilingual and multicultural country of ours, English in certain respects, acted as a means of communication, transmission of ideas and knowledge. The enforcement of English education and English as a means of instruction by Macaulay in government schools and colleges, aided in the development of English as a leading language in the country. Macaulay’s vision to create a ‘class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’ has helped incorporate the language into the very core of the Indian subconscious, albeit upto varying degrees. Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory: Nations, Classes and Literatures* understands that the only national literary intelligensia that existed in India today are the ones who have a shared body of knowledge, shared presumptions and a shared language of mutual exchange that is fairly grounded in English. (Ahmad). The corpus of Indian English literature commonly incorporated in anthologies of Indian English literature often reflects this idea of Ahmad. They somehow always begin with Macaulay’s *Minutes* and continue on till the present day writers like Amitav Ghosh and David Davidar, detailing out the Indian freedom struggle. Almost every anthology on Indian English Literature posit India as a consolidated, and composite whole. The political entity of the nation state India is in certain ways, almost legitimised, again and again, through this process of anthology formation. It defined the boundaries of what ‘Indian’ literature, especially what ‘Indian literature in English’ was supposed to encompass. Everything else that escaped the categorisation and moved beyond the gambit of this more or less stringent category of literature does not make it within the Indian English literature. The idea of what Indian English literature is, is linked with the dominant understanding of the socio-political and cultural and economic entity that is India. The nation, in the imagination of the common man, rarely includes the ‘North-East’ as a part of it. Even if it does, very little efforts are made to show the region in its truest form. It is often grossly misrepresented and underrepresented in the socio-political and cultural circles.

Anthology makers of Indian English literature often forget that English is an extremely important language in this part of the country. Brought in by the Christian missionaries, English entered the landscape through the setting up of the English language schools in the region. The Christian missionaries also brought in print culture in the region. Apart from publishing a number of textbooks, books on grammar and Christian journals in local languages, the missionaries also brought English education into a region where much of the languages did not have a script. Priyanka Kakoti in her book *English Writings from Northeast India: Of Inclusions, Exclusions and Beyond* states that unlike the West, more emphasis was laid on the spoken word over the written one. It was believed that the spoken word was a more authentic. Much of the writers in this region were educated in English language schools. English also provided a script for those languages which did not have a script of their own. (Kakoti) While contestations exist about on whether English can or should be used as a mode of expression, especially in the case the stories in languages which do not have a script, it does not undermine the fact that English is intertwined with the very psyche of the communities and the people who live here. It is much more so than the writers hailing from communities in ‘mainland’ India, many of whom have

their own scripts. It is important to note that this argument of the use of English as a script, in no means, undermines the overarching presence and influence of oral literary traditions which do not depend on a script to document their stories. Tilotamma Shome in her book chapter entitled "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India" understands that the contemporary writers need to fuse the written with the oral and need to 'write orality' as a means to preserve their culture.

With the emergence of interest in the region's literary output, the idea of the canon of Indian literature or rather Indian writings in English has slowly transforming. Recognition of stalwarts like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Dhruva Hazarika, Janice Pariat is slowly transforming the boundaries of what English literature in India can and should be. However, the literatures from the region, bring with themselves a unique perspective of nationhood, identity, culture and belonging unlike any other. The literatures from the region, stand almost at a juxtaposition to the imagination of India that has been propounded for so long, the India of R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. The very geopolitical, spatial and temporal positioning of the entity India is sometimes scrutinised, examined and sometimes subverted in these literatures. No other region could give a better understanding of the socio-political, cultural, temporal and spatial presence of India as the 'North-East' of India does.

One of the key contributions of the literary outputs of the region into corpus of Indian English Literature is the understanding of marginality or peripherality. The 'North-East' has for a very long period of time, existed on the fringes of the socio-political and cultural considerations of 'India'. Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K. Pachuau in the Introduction of their edited book *Landscape, Culture and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India* understand that the region was excluded even when it was sought to be absorbed into the nation. The British colonial masters constituted it as an 'exceptional' space, where the usual rules and laws of colonial British India did not apply. The application of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 demarcated an Inner Line in the foothills. This act separated the hills from the plains and regulate the movement of the British subjects beyond the line; they needed a permit issued by the Chief Commissioner in order to enter the zone. The Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 and the Frontier Tract Regulations Act of 1880 restricted further access into the region. The latter act excluded the hill areas from the operations of the normal codes of civil and criminal procedure- including the property registration and transfer of the British government. This separated the region from the mainland, cutting off important access into the region. The Inner Line not only separated the region from the mainland in more ways than one, but also cut into landscapes and livelihoods that had been intimately interconnected. The people had to reconfigure their very existence, in order to fit into the new model of life that their colonial masters had thrust upon them. This also led to the hills being demarcated as the 'site of the non-normative'. The tribal communities who had existed in the region for millennia were suddenly labelled as 'wild' and 'savage', undermining eons of cultural knowledge and traditions as mere fanciful ramblings. (Bhattacharya and Pachuau). After Independence, the Indian government forced several disparate communities into states which often failed to meet the needs and demands of the people they were populated by. Therefore, the region has always found itself at the margins of the Indian imagination, both literally and figuratively. This marginality finds expression in the literatures from the region as well. K.C. Baral in "Articulating Marginality: Emerging Literatures from Northeast India" opines that marginality has become a defining trope that signified the literature's location and the reception by the mainstream critics. The literatures from the region portray the socio-political and cultural peripherality of the region in respect to the greater India. (Baral). Dhruva Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* is a prime example of the marginality experienced in the region. Set as a race against odds for Hanse and his best friend Pranab, the story is set in the 'troubled times' of clashes between the militant groups and the state. Similarly, Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* uses the Assam Movement as a backdrop to the novel. The plot is set in a small town of Parbatpuri. The protagonist is Rukmini, the wife of a district collector. She worked as a part-time lecturer at a local college. While on the surface, her life seemed secure and safe, as she lived in a big bungalow overlooking a cremation ground, untouched by the toils of the common people. However, she is soon forced to come to terms with the fact that the town in which she lives, is slowly transforming. When the Assam student's agitation begins to gain momentum, she is forced to grapple with the dreary realities of violence in the form of murders, extortions and kidnappings. The inability or the rather callous attitude of the political powers in trying to arrive at a peaceful solutions to the problems at large, is hinted in much of the literature from the region. Sanjib Baruah in his book *Durable Disorder* understands that much of the ethnic violence in the region arose because the redrawing of the maps was done without taking into account, the pre-colonial borders of the various ethnic communities. Matters became much worse when the territories were categorised as 'excluded areas' or 'un-administered areas' and then suddenly turned into 'borderlands'. (Baruah). Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* goes beyond the marginality imposed on the people by the state. The novel explores the role and position of women in the doubly marginalised social landscape of the region. The protagonist, a young girl of five is sent off to live with her grandmother. The grandmother was of the opinion that women did not need an education and wanted to train the protagonist to become a good Naga wife and mother. The assumption of the grandmother that women did not need agency or love or affection or time to play or even a piece of meat in their food is a reflection on how the patriarchal

systems define the socio-political and cultural location of women. That location is again at the very margins of this already marginalised existence. One cannot forget the role of the Meira Paibis, the group of women who protested against the human rights violations in Manipur. The rape, torture and murder Thursday. Manorama by paramilitary soldiers in Imphal on July 15, 2004, brought about 40 women to the Assam Rifles base. They stripped naked and held a visceral demonstration. The result of the demonstrations were such that Assam Rifles had to shift the base from Kangla to outside the city. One need to only look at the recent gang rape of the two Kuki-Zo women in the last year to understand the role of sexual violence in keeping women marginalised, even in the case of ethnic conflicts.

Another interesting feature that the literatures from the region bring into the corpus of Indian English literature is ambiguity. No other region understands the nebulous nature of political boundaries like the region. The 'North-East' has been constructed and reconstructed again and again, ever since the colonial times. The implementation of political boundaries on interconnected relationships and negotiations that have existed between various tribes has torn apart centuries of relationships, leaving behind a quest for belonging. Sanjib Baruah, in his book *Durable Disorder*, informs of an interesting tale of a man called Dindu Mari, from China. Dindu was an Idu and lived in a region in Arunachal Pradesh, which was closer to China and the Tibet region than any other village in India. Dindu had found employment as a 'political interpreter' for both the Chinese and the Indian, once during the Sino-Indian war and again in 2000. The estranged relationships between India and China, had forced Dindu to restrict communication with his relatives living on the other side of the border. (Baruah). Migration from the neighbouring country of Bangladesh into Assam, the movement of non-Khasi people from Shillong, which had been the former capital of Greater Assam, to Guwahati, led to a sort of hybridity that cannot be ignored in the 'North-East' where the demography is so complex. Identity, with respect to the states themselves and the mainland India, is ambiguous. In Siddhatha Deb's *The Point of Return*, Dr. Dam tries his hardest to find a identity of himself, to root himself in a place. Having migrated from Bangladesh, he manages to build a house for his siblings in Silchar. He is forced to traverse the region, moving from Narangi to Shillong to Silchar to try and set his roots. His home is a lived experience, existing beyond the place, as Kakoti puts it. (Kakoti). The ambiguity of his identity- a Bangladeshi, an Assamese, an Indian is very beautifully explored in the novel.

It is only recently that Indian English Literature has started to explore the very conceptions of an Indian 'nation'. Literatures from the 'North-East' challenge the very foundations on which the Indian English literature sits. They manage to present a nuanced understanding of what it means for literature to break away from the circumnavigation of the Centre and move beyond the very understanding of a Centre and Periphery.

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