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## VOICES FROM THE HILLS: TRIBAL MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN NORTH EAST INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING

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**Abstract:** Northeastern India exhibits a wealth of cultural diversity, with numerous tribal populations that each preserve their own languages and customs. Northeastern's Indian literature is essential for celebrating and conserving this variety. Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Tamsula Ao, and Mitra Phukan explored themes such as oral storytelling, traditional knowledge, festivals, environmental awareness, and identity. Tales and memories are incorporated into Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* and Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, while Moatsu and Bihu festivals are emphasized as cultural identity in Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* and Phukan's *The Collector's Wife*. It explores the difficulties due to migration and modernity in tribal life. These writers ensure that indigenous voices are heard by bridging tradition and modern challenges through their portrayals of tribal life in both rural and urban areas. Northeastern English literature is used as a cultural preservation tool as well as a cultural repository.

**Keywords:** North East India, Tribal literature, Oral traditions, Cultural identity, Modernization, Folklore, Moatsu, Bihu.

The distinctive collection of tribes in North East India, along with their distinct dialects, customs, and historical narratives that set them apart from the rest of the country, preserves the region's cultural diversity. The North East region consists of eight states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura (Sharma 12), which together host more than 200 distinct ethnic groups with their own languages and cultural practices. Indian English literature from this region functions as a vital instrument for safeguarding and handing down the cultural inheritance of native tribes through its diverse literary works (Misra, Fiction xvi). As significant contributions to modern Indian literature, the literary works from the northeastern region portray both the daily struggles and happy times that these communities go through.

Indian English literature from the North East combines detailed examinations of traditional cultural elements with modern political challenges (Nag 35) and the impact of contemporary forces. Authors Mamang Dai, Tamsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mitra Phukan are part of the North East literary trend and produce important works of Indian English literature. These authors use their novels to discuss global issues while providing in-depth insights of how North Eastern cultural traditions are impacted by contemporary culture. These authors' narratives particularly examine the challenges faced by indigenous communities in navigating their cultural heritage in a time of global interconnectedness.

The study explores how traditional tribal institutions, cultural customs, and communal issues are portrayed in the literary works of Indian English authors from the northeastern regions. These literary works are used as a means of critical analysis to demonstrate how local writers preserve and advance cultural diversity through their writing. To find out how literature supports the preservation of cultural heritage while fortifying tribal identity, the study will examine a few selected literary works.

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, published in 2006, effectively establishes a close bond between written literature and regional storytelling customs. Through its structure, the novel replicates aspects of oral storytelling while simultaneously recording the historical memory of the Adi tribe. The author of *The Legends of Pensam* skillfully weaves together personal tales, historical facts, and ancient mythology to produce a seamless story. By fusing parts of the past and present, the text employs the same strategy as traditional storytelling, opening up new possibilities for understanding memory and identity. By using universal themes of love, grief, and the passing of time, the author is able to address a wide range of audiences while maintaining a close connection with Adi cultural practices.

The book by Temsula Ao called *These Hills Called Home* (2006) demonstrates how Naga oral traditions influence personal and group identification. The stories that Ao presents in her work emerge from Naga cultural mythology because they depict fundamental tribal aspects alongside their associated moral framework. The writing of Ao demonstrates a profound admiration for Naga oral heritage, which maintains community memories and self-identity through storytelling practices. Through her works, Temsula Ao consistently presents three main topics that demonstrate the Naga people's strong connection to nature alongside their stories about nature-linked relationships.

Traditional storytelling techniques are used in Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* (Kire, River 45) (2014) to depict a character's spiritual development. Through the direction and visions of dreams and omens that arise in traditional indigenous systems prevalent in the Northeast, the author crafts characters that pursue spiritual ways. In order to reflect local cultural practices that view nature as a medium for spiritual experiences, Kire blends natural forces with supernatural elements. By enabling stories to move between the material and spiritual realms, Kire's supernatural storytelling revives the oral tradition and gives individuals real-life experiences.

The adaptability of conventional storytelling techniques is demonstrated in contemporary writing. Contemporary authors preserve local indigenous stories that influence cultural identities in communities in the Northeast by incorporating myths and personal experiences from regional folklore.

For the tribes of the Northeast, festivals and rituals form the fundamental basis of their cultural traditions. Because cultural events stem from deeply ingrained spiritual linkages with the rhythms of nature and agricultural life, they go much beyond simple social activities. In order to commemorate significant seasonal changes in their cultural chronology, such as planting and harvest cycles and seasonal shifts, tribes celebrate their festivals in harmony with the natural world. Through their festival representations, North Eastern writers highlight the close ties that exist between people and their country and demonstrate the importance of rituals in maintaining social cohesion and cultural traditions.

In *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), Easterine Kire explores in detail the Moatsu Festival, a significant yearly occasion for the Ao Nagas to commemorate the conclusion of their planting season. Because it combines traditional dances and community feasts with storytelling traditions, the Moatsu Festival serves as a time of gratitude and renewal that preserves tribal ties to the land while fortifying social ties. Since the festival is both a religious practice and a reminder of the Ao Nagas' historical past, the writer's thorough analysis of it reveals its profound cultural significance. In addition to bolstering the tribe's agricultural base, the yearly event shows how their customs shape their community's daily activities.

The importance of the Assamese Bihu festival is illustrated in Mitra Phukan's novel *The Collector's Wife*, published in 2005. To commemorate the start of the harvest, the lively Bihu celebration takes place in the spring. During the Bihu festival, the Assamese community uses dance, singing, and feasting to celebrate rebirth and wealth. Through her book, Phukan shows Bihu as a cultural festival that both symbolizes Assamese farming methods and also as a unifying symbol for all groups.

In order to demonstrate how Assamese from many communities continue to share a similar relationship, the novel creates a festival setting where everyone gathers to share their own histories. Because the pieces displayed at these festivals convey essential cultural values of their community, they have uses beyond commemorating agricultural achievements or environmental changes. Through these fundamental rituals, tribes strengthen their ties to their history, their communities, and their natural environment. As North Eastern communities adapt to the contemporary world, the continued significance of these cultural activities is ensured by Kire and Phukan's documenting and celebration of festivals.

The critical usage of myth and folklore by tribes in the Northeast helps them to define their cultural identity. These oral-transmitted traditional stories serve as a source of entertainment and a foundation for the tribes' core philosophical ideas. While upholding societal norms and documenting significant historical events, the narratives attempt to explain natural phenomena. Folklore and myth are useful tools that assist North Eastern writers explore themes of justice, morality, and cultural sustainability when they draw on ancient stories in their works.

The novel *The Black Hill* by Mamang Dai demonstrates how folklore (Goswami 154) integrates into historical events to generate a detailed narrative that connects past and present times. Mamang Dai's work connects a tragic romance to the British colonial history of Arunachal Pradesh. Through her retelling of traditional Naga tales during colonialism, Mamang Dai reveals how folklore maintains its influence on group memory and cultural identity through times of external stress. The fictional story elements in the book do not function as pure fantasy but deeply embed themselves within historical indigenous struggles to create a moving analysis of colonial impact on native customs.

Similarly, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) by Temsula Ao reintroduces Naga folktales that examine themes of justice, retribution, and morality that establish the community's moral norms. Through her retellings, Ao demonstrates how folk narratives transform individuals by providing meaning (Zama, *Emerging Literatures* 94) to their personal existence. Temsula Ao's contemporary retelling of classic tales ensures that they will remain relevant for future generations, preserving Naga cultural legacy, because they are essential components that uphold tribal identity, survival, and resilience, the folklore and myths found in Northeastern literature function beyond simple narratives.

In the contemporary, globalized world, these tales serve as moral compass points, aid in understanding human nature, and prevent cultural extinction. Rather than employing nature as a passive backdrop, the literature of the North East views it as a dynamic force that actively shapes the human experience. While acknowledging how vital nature is to human survival, people of the North Eastern tribes view nature as a sacred entity. Through their creative works, the local authors usually highlight the fundamental cultural and spiritual significance of nature.

The intricate connection between nature and human civilization is illustrated in Mamang Dai's book *The Legends of Pensam*. Because rivers, forests, and mountains are living entities that continue to hold significant historical and cultural value for the Adi culture, the story portrays nature as an ethereal force. According to Adis, nature is a sacred entity that merits respect and care that goes beyond money. The story's meticulous portrayal of the natural world demonstrates how the Adi people uphold their cultural customs, which are closely linked to the land.

By portraying nature as a real character in Easterine Kire's book *When the River Sleeps*, she establishes a connection between nature and human characteristics. The protagonist traverses several natural settings throughout the novel in order to confront challenges and get insight from the planet. Kire's writing style illustrates the close spiritual ties that exist between the tribes of the Northeast and their natural surroundings, which they view as a living force that engages with human experiences. Through the journey of the main character, the author demonstrates how nature actively shapes human destiny.

Through their writing, these authors emphasize the need of protecting the environment by highlighting the role that nature plays in human society. Through their writing, the authors hope to improve readers' understanding of the relationship between culture and nature and help them recognize the importance of both.

Tribal populations in the Northeast face significant changes as a result of contemporary development, urbanization, and global interconnectedness. Native populations are forced to preserve their cultural practices despite external influences due to the area's rapid socioeconomic transition, which includes political conflicts, migratory patterns, and economic advancement. Tribal adaptation strategies to outside developments are examined in North-Eastern Indian literature, coupled with traditional vs modern disputes.

Anjum Hasan examines the effects of urbanization on the self-perception of individuals from the Northeast who relocate to cities like Shillong in her book *Lunatic in My Head* (2007). When old tribal rituals collide with modern urban life, Northern Easterners experience sentiments of cultural confusion and abandonment, which are embodied by the novel's protagonist. Hasan explores the complexities of belonging and the continuous tension between historical customs and modern viewpoints via the experiences of the main character.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) analyzes how political tensions (Baruah 94) in Assam lead to daily disturbances through insurgencies and migrations. Characters in the novel struggle with identity difficulties while attempting to survive in the face of Assam's shifting political landscape and remaining devoted to their communities. Phukan's portrayal of the Assamese struggle for self-determination is a powerful illustration of the political factors influencing tribal identity and the resilience of the people.

Through their writing, authors from the Northeast examine the complex process of upholding traditional values in the face of migration and modernization. These writers explain how indigenous communities adjust their way of life to preserve their traditional customs despite global economic integration.

By preserving and respecting the diverse cultural features present in the area, English literature from North Eastern India serves an important purpose. In order to provide intricate and thorough depictions of tribal life, authors from the area look into traditional tales and cultural customs in addition to knowledge derived from nature and issues associated with urbanization. Through their writing, these authors explore basic notions of human identity, explore what it means to belong to a community, and explore how cultures might endure in contemporary society.

North Eastern literature acts as a transformative link between the region's ongoing urbanization and globalization, preventing the loss of tribal traditional practices. In addition to documenting tribal life, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mitra Phukan have made a name for themselves as writers and cultural activists who protect indigenous identities from outside influences. In their writings, the authors make a compelling case for the importance of preserving the North-Eastern regions' rich historical heritage and cultural diversity.

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