

10. From the Language of Colonization to the Language of Enhancement: Translating Thoughts of Northeast Indian Writers

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Abstract

This study investigates how contemporary writers from Northeast India have transformed English from a symbol of colonial authority into a means of articulating cultural identity and preserving indigenous heritage. Through an analysis of select literary texts, it reveals how these authors utilize English to document communal experiences, counter mainstream misrepresentations, and translate local narratives for broader audiences. By adapting the language to reflect regional voices and traditions, they have redefined English as a medium for both resistance and representation, contributing significantly to the evolving landscape of postcolonial literature in India's northeastern context.

Keywords: *Northeast Indian literature; postcolonial writing; linguistic appropriation; oral traditions; cultural translation; narrative authority; English language; indigenous expression; literary identity*

Introduction

The English language, evolving from Germanic tribes, has traversed through a series of rise and fall, changes and modifications, assimilations and deductions to achieve its current status as a global language.¹ Its journey in the Indian subcontinent began during British colonization when it was introduced primarily for administrative convenience and as a cultural policy. As Lord Macaulay, often considered the father of English in India, argued, the language was intended to change the taste, and consequently the mindset of the Indians.²

However, the trajectory of English in Northeast India presents a distinctive case study in linguistic adaptation. Unlike other parts of the subcontinent, the introduction of English in this geographically



and culturally distinct region was more closely tied to missionary activities than direct colonial administration. The motive of the spread of this language was more of religion and education.³ This unique historical context has significantly influenced how contemporary Northeast Indian writers engage with English.

The Northeast region of India, comprising eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura), is characterized by remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity. With numerous languages and dialects spoken across these states, the region presents what Sharma describes as “the existence of numerous voices in forms of languages and dialects.”⁴ In this multilingual landscape, English has emerged as a neutral medium of communication across ethnic boundaries, and increasingly, as a preferred language for literary expression.

This paper examines how contemporary Northeast Indian writers have appropriated English to articulate their unique cultural experiences, traditions, and histories. By analyzing selected works from prominent authors of the region, this study argues that these writers have transformed English from a language of colonization to one of enhancement, enabling them to translate indigenous thoughts for both regional and global audiences.

Literature Review

The study of English literature from Northeast India is a relatively recent academic endeavor, with most comprehensive research emerging only in the past few decades. Early writings about the region were predominantly produced by British colonial officials, ethnographers, and missionaries who documented their observations through an imperial lens. As Biswas and Suklabaidya observe, “The hills of the north-east were of immense military and strategic importance to the Empire... The knowledge about the communities living in these unknown territories became an inseparable part of the project of the Empire.”⁵

During the second half of the nineteenth century, European and British officers and anthropologists such as Johnstone, J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mills, Verrier Elwin, Major John Butler, Alexander Mackenzie and Christoph Von Furer Haimendorff produced ethnological works in English.⁶ These works, while



valuable in some respects, inevitably reflected colonial biases and perspectives.

In the post-independence period, academic interest in Northeast Indian literature has gradually increased, with scholars like Tilottoma Misra, Udayon Mishra, and Sukalpa Bhattacharjee making significant contributions to the field.⁷ Their research highlights how the region's complex history of political conflicts, ethnic tensions, and geographical isolation has shaped its literary traditions.

Recent scholarship by Zama, Longchar, and Ao has expanded our understanding of how Northeast Indian writers navigate questions of identity, tradition, and modernity in their works.⁸ These studies emphasize the dual role of English literature from the region: as both a means of preserving indigenous cultural knowledge and as a tool for challenging stereotypical representations perpetuated by mainstream Indian media and academia.

Building on this existing scholarship, this paper seeks to examine how contemporary Northeast Indian writers have transformed English from a colonial language to a medium of cultural enhancement and identity assertion.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial theory, particularly drawing from the work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who observed that "language carries culture and culture carries entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world."⁹ While Ngũgĩ advocated for a return to indigenous African languages, this paper examines how Northeast Indian writers have instead appropriated the colonial language to articulate their indigenous experiences.

The concept of "appropriation" as articulated by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in "The Empire Writes Back" provides a useful framework for understanding this process.¹⁰ According to them, postcolonial writers appropriate the language of the center and replace it with a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. In the Northeast Indian context, this involves reconfiguring English to express



indigenous worldviews, oral traditions, and cultural narratives.

Additionally, Homi Bhabha's concept of the “third space”—a zone of negotiation, translation, and hybridity—helps conceptualize how Northeast Indian writers create new literary forms that are neither fully aligned with Western literary traditions nor entirely indigenous.¹¹ The resulting literature occupies an in-between space, challenging both colonial hierarchies and nationalist homogenization.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, primarily relying on textual analysis of selected literary works by contemporary Northeast Indian writers. The primary texts analyzed include Mamang Dai's “The Legends of Pensam,” Easterine Kire's “A Naga Village Remembered,” Malsawmi Jacob's “Zorami,” and Shrutimala Duara's “Travelling with Dreams”¹²; these texts were selected based on their thematic focus on cultural memory, oral traditions, and historical narratives specific to Northeast India.

The analysis examines how these writers employ English to translate indigenous thoughts, oral histories, and cultural practices for readers unfamiliar with their specific contexts. The study also draws from secondary sources, including critical essays, interviews with authors, and scholarly works on Northeast Indian literature, to provide contextual understanding of the region's literary traditions and historical background.

Colonial Beginnings and Linguistic Evolution

The journey of English in Northeast India began with colonial contact, primarily through missionary activities rather than direct administrative imposition. Unlike in mainland India, where English was systematically introduced through Macaulay's education policy, the spread of the language in the Northeast was closely tied to the introduction of Christianity and formal education by missionaries.¹³

This distinctive history has significantly influenced how the language has been perceived and utilized



in the region. In Nagaland, for instance, the Christian missionaries paved the way for rise of Naga literature by introducing translation of religious texts in Naga languages written in roman script.¹⁴ Around 1931-32, Assamese was excluded from the Nagaland school curriculum and the Government of Nagaland accepted English as the state language and introduced it as a medium of instruction in schools.¹⁵

Similar patterns emerged in other Northeast states. In Arunachal Pradesh, Assamese was the medium of instruction in the schools until 1972, after which it was replaced by English.¹⁶ In Mizoram, English was preferred over Assamese medium of instruction in the 1950s.¹⁷ These historical developments explain why English has gained prominence as the official language in almost all the states of Northeast India.¹⁸

This historical context helps explain why English, despite being a colonial language, did not face the same level of resistance in Northeast India as it did in other parts of the country. Instead, it was often embraced as a practical solution to the region's linguistic diversity and as a pathway to wider communication. The continued relevance of English in post-colonial northeast India remained the need for a common language.¹⁹

Translating Oral Traditions Through English

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary Northeast Indian writers is their translation of oral traditions into written literature through English. For many communities in the region, oral literature was the primary form of cultural expression, with knowledge, history, and traditions passed down through word of mouth, from generation to generation.²⁰ These communities were rich in oral literature but for the lack of script they had no fountain of written literature.²¹

Without written scripts, vernaculars could not emerge as mediums of literary expression; native literature remained largely in the realm of oral traditions. It was only after the introduction of English and the Roman script that people could give a textual shape to their oral literature either by using Roman script in their improvised language or through the nativized English.²²



Mamang Dai's "The Legends of Pensam" exemplifies this process of translating oral traditions into written form. Drawing from the rich oral heritage of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, Dai creates a narrative that preserves traditional knowledge while making it accessible to contemporary readers. Her work straddles the boundaries between myth and history, memory and imagination, creating what has been described as a literary space where past and present converge.²³

Similarly, Easterine Kire's "A Naga Village Remembered" documents the oral histories of the Angami Naga community, particularly focusing on their experiences during World War II. Kire's work demonstrates how English can be used to preserve historical memories that might otherwise be lost as oral traditions decline.²⁴

These writers are not merely translating from one language to another but are engaged in a more complex process of cultural translation. They are finding ways to express indigenous worldviews, belief systems, and narrative structures through a language that historically developed in a very different cultural context. In doing so, they are expanding the expressive capabilities of English while simultaneously preserving their cultural heritage.

Reclaiming Narrative Authority

Prior to the emergence of indigenous writers from Northeast India, representations of the region and its peoples were primarily produced by outsiders. Prior to the indulgence of people of this region in the literary field, their cultures and existence were written about by the outsiders; first the British ethnographers and anthropologists, and later by scholars from various parts of the country.²⁵

These external representations often reflected biases and misconceptions. Those who wrote about the Northeast gave their own interpretations; made their surveys, analysis and research and classified the people according to what their informers or limited observations yielded.²⁶ Such approaches inevitably resulted in partial or distorted understandings of the region's cultures and histories.

Contemporary Northeast Indian writers are challenging these external representations by reclaiming narrative authority. Through their works, they are asserting the right to tell their own stories from



insider perspectives, correcting misrepresentations, and filling gaps in historical accounts. These writers delve into the facts of the land and reproduce the history of the region and its people through the sands of time which have been ignored and avoided from being represented since long.²⁷

Malsawmi Jacob's "Zorami" illustrates this reclamation of narrative authority. The novel addresses the Mizo insurgency and the suffering caused by the Indian government's counter-insurgency operations, including the controversial "grouping" of villages and aerial bombings—aspects of history that have received limited attention in mainstream Indian historiography.²⁸ Jacob's work gives voice to experiences that have been marginalized or erased in official narratives.

By writing in English, these authors are able to reach audiences beyond their immediate communities, ensuring that their counter-narratives can engage with and challenge dominant discourses about the Northeast. The fictional narratives have become a tool for the contemporary writers of northeast India to voice the earlier hushed through loud words in written form.²⁹

Documenting Historical Trauma and Resilience

Northeast India has experienced numerous conflicts since independence, including separatist movements, ethnic tensions, and state violence. These experiences have left profound impacts on communities throughout the region, creating collective traumas that are often absent from mainstream Indian historical narratives.

Contemporary writers from the region use English to document these historical traumas and the resilience of communities in the face of violence and displacement. Through their works, they create what might be described as literary testimonies that bear witness to difficult histories while also celebrating cultural survival and adaptation.

Malsawmi Jacob's "Zorami" provides a powerful example of this approach. The novel addresses the Mizo insurgency (1966-1986) and the traumatic impact of counter-insurgency operations on civilian populations. The novel explores how the people were affected by the bombings and shootings and the artificial grouping camps or villages.³⁰ Jacob does not shy away from depicting the suffering caused



by these events, yet she also portrays the resilience of the Mizo people and their eventual achievement of peace.

Easterine Kire's "A Naga Village Remembered" similarly documents the traumatic experiences of the Angami Naga community during World War II, when their villages became battlegrounds between Japanese and Allied forces. Kire records not only the physical destruction but also the disruption of traditional ways of life and the psychological impacts of war.³¹

By documenting these historical traumas in English, these writers ensure that these experiences become part of broader historical records accessible to readers beyond their immediate communities. This documentation serves multiple purposes: it validates community experiences, challenges official narratives, and contributes to processes of collective healing.

The Transformation of English in Northeast Indian Literature

The works of contemporary Northeast Indian writers demonstrate how English has been transformed from a language of colonization to one of enhancement. This transformation involves several key processes:

1. **Indigenization of the language:** These writers modify standard English by incorporating local terms, expressions, and speech patterns, creating what might be described as "nativized" forms of English that better reflect their cultural realities.
2. **Hybridization of literary forms:** They combine elements of indigenous storytelling traditions with Western literary genres, creating innovative narrative structures that defy easy categorization.
3. **Expansion of expressive possibilities:** By using English to articulate indigenous worldviews and experiences, they expand what the language can express, challenging its colonial associations and reclaiming it as a tool for cultural expression.

This transformation is evident in how these writers approach themes such as the relationship between humans and the natural world, concepts of time and history, and understandings of community and identity. Their work demonstrates that English can be decolonized and repurposed as a medium for



indigenous expression.

As David Crystal notes in “English as a Global Language,” “A global language belongs to nobody in particular; anyone who learns it, owns it”³²; Northeast Indian writers exemplify this principle, showing how a formerly colonial language can be claimed and transformed by those it was once imposed upon.

Conclusion

This study has examined how contemporary Northeast Indian writers have transformed English from a language of colonization to one of enhancement. Through their works, these writers have appropriated the colonial language and repurposed it as a medium for cultural expression, historical documentation, and identity assertion.

The analysis of selected texts by Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Malsawmi Jacob, and Shrutimala Duara demonstrates several key findings:

First, these writers use English to translate oral traditions into written literature, preserving cultural knowledge that might otherwise be lost while making it accessible to wider audiences. It was only after the English language was introduced that people could give a textual shape to their oral literature.³³

Second, they reclaim narrative authority by challenging external representations of the Northeast and offering insider perspectives on the region's cultures, histories, and contemporary realities. Their writings tend to decode as well as actually complete the half truth that had not been deciphered by the ethnographers, anthropologists, demographers and the contemporary media who presented their views on the northeast.³⁴

Third, they document historical traumas and community resilience, creating literary testimonies that bear witness to difficult histories while celebrating cultural survival. Contemporary Northeast writers focus on the socio-cultural and psychological aspects of human lives rather than being overtoned with



politics like earlier writings about the region.³⁵

These findings suggest that the relationship between language and power in postcolonial contexts is more complex than simple opposition. While English was initially introduced as part of colonial domination, Northeast Indian writers have transformed it into a tool for cultural empowerment and identity assertion.

The work of these writers also challenges simplistic binaries between “tradition” and “modernity,” demonstrating how indigenous cultures can adapt and evolve without losing their distinctive characteristics. Their success in using English to express indigenous worldviews suggests that the language can be decolonized and repurposed as a medium for cultural expression.

As Northeast Indian literature in English continues to develop, it offers important lessons about cultural resilience, linguistic adaptation, and the power of literature to preserve and transform cultural identities in a rapidly changing world. In the words of Achebe, the colonial language could help in bringing together separate groups with a common language³⁶—a principle that Northeast Indian writers have demonstrated through their innovative and culturally rich contributions to English literature.

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