

Subaltern Speaks: The Aesthetics of Social Realism in Select Novels by Northeast Indian Women

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Abstract: *This article conducts a critical analysis of the unique aesthetics of social realism employed by women writers from Northeast India. It posits that their fiction, written in English, functions as a powerful medium for the subaltern—a term encompassing the region's communities marginalized by the dual forces of mainland Indian nationalism and internal patriarchy—to articulate its lived reality. Moving beyond classical social realism, which often prioritizes economic determinism; this study argues that the selected writers forge a distinct "intersectional realism." This mode of representation intricately weaves together the political (the insurgency-military complex), the geographical (the borderland identity), the ethnic (tribal and non-tribal dynamics), and the gendered (patriarchal constraints) to create a multi-layered narrative truth. Through close textual analysis of select novels—Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014), Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head* (2007), and Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011)—the article examines how these authors use specific narrative strategies: the infusion of indigenous myth and oral history to challenge monolithic national narratives, the centering of the everyday lives of women amidst conflict to humanize political strife, and the depiction of urban spaces like Shillong as sites of cultural negotiation. The research concludes that the social realism of Northeast women writers is not merely descriptive but profoundly agitative. It is an aesthetic of resistance and remembrance, a crucial intervention that decolonizes literary representation and allows the subaltern, in its myriad voices, to speak and be heard.*

Keywords: *Social Realism, Northeast Indian Literature, Subaltern, Women Writers, Post colonialism, Mamang Dai, Anjum Hasan, Easterine Kire, Intersectionality, Indian English Fiction.*

1. Introduction

The literary landscape of Indian Writing in English (IWE) has historically been dominated by narratives from the metropolitan centers and the mainland heartland. However, the last few decades have witnessed a significant and powerful efflorescence of voices from the Northeast—a region often homogenized in the national imagination as a remote, troubled frontier. Among these voices, women writers have emerged as particularly compelling chroniclers of the region's complex social fabric. Their works, while diverse, are united by a profound engagement with social reality. But this engagement moves beyond the traditional confines of 19th-century European social realism, which primarily critiqued class structures under industrial capitalism.

This article argues that the social realism embodied in the English fictions of Northeast women writers is a unique aesthetic project, best understood through the theoretical lens of the **subaltern**. As articulated by the Subaltern Studies collective, the subaltern refers to populations outside the hegemonic power structures, whose history and voice are systematically erased. The Northeast, with its history of colonial isolation, contested integration into the Indian nation-state, ongoing ethnic conflicts, and militarization, constitutes a subaltern space within the Indian polity. Furthermore,

women within these communities often experience a double marginalization—from the state and from internal patriarchal norms.

Research Problem: Therefore, the central research question of this article is: **How do women writers from Northeast India develop a distinct aesthetic of social realism to articulate the intersectional subaltern consciousness of the region?**

Research Objectives: The objective is to analyze the narrative techniques and thematic concerns that characterize this realism, demonstrating how it is inflected by gender, ethnicity, and geopolitics.

The primary texts for this study have been selected for their representative power in showcasing different facets of this realism:

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014): A historical novel that uses the archival silence around a 19th-century tribal story to construct a mytho-realist narrative, challenging the official history of the Indo-Tibetan borderlands.

Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011): A novel that employs a stark, intimate realism to document the human cost of the Naga independence struggle on everyday life, particularly through the eyes of ordinary men and women.

Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head* (2007): A work of urban realism that explores the psychological and social liminality of youth in Shillong, caught between tribal affiliations, non-tribal anxieties, and global aspirations.

This article will proceed by first establishing the theoretical framework, combining social realism with subaltern and feminist theories. It will then analyze each primary text to elucidate the specific aesthetic strategies employed. Finally, it will synthesize these findings to define the unique contribution of these writers to the broader canon of Indian literature.

2. Theoretical Framework: Intersectional Realism and the Subaltern Voice

Classical social realism, as practiced by Dickens, Zola, or Gorky, sought to expose the grim conditions of the working class under industrial capitalism. Its aesthetic was predicated on detailed observation, verisimilitude, and a belief in art as a tool for social reform. However, applying this model directly to the postcolonial context of Northeast India is insufficient. The primary contradiction here is not solely class-based but is overdetermined by colonialism, nationalism, ethnic identity, and gender.

This study, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of three theoretical domains:

1. **Subaltern Studies:** The work of Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is crucial. Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the structural silencing of the marginalized. The fiction of Northeast women writers can be seen as a literary attempt to circumvent this silencing. They create a space where the subaltern's experience—of violence, displacement, and cultural erosion—is not just reported but embodied and felt.

2. **Feminist Standpoint Theory:** This theory argues that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalized groups, particularly women, possess a unique and critical perspective on power relations. The women writers studied here write from a specific standpoint—that of being women within a marginalized region. This dual perspective allows them to reveal the gendered dimensions of political conflict, which are often ignored in male-dominated narratives of war and nationalism.

3. **Intersectionality:** Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality provides the most precise framework for analyzing the layered oppression depicted in these novels. A Naga woman's experience, for instance, is shaped not just by her gender or her ethnicity, but by the intersection of these identities within a specific political context (the conflict) and a geographical one (the borderland). The social realism practiced by these writers is thus an **intersectional realism**—one that meticulously charts how these different axes of power converges on the individual and the community.

This combined framework allows us to see their literary project not as passive reflection but as active intervention. Their aesthetics become a method of testimony, a way of writing the region into existence on its own terms.

3. Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*: Mytho-Realism and Reclaiming History

Mamang Dai, an Arunachali writer, exemplifies a mode of realism that seamlessly blends historical record with indigenous myth and oral tradition. *The Black Hill* is based on the true story of two friends—Gomang Bo, an Abor (Adi) tribesman, and Kajinsha, a Mishmi chief—whose journey to Tibet in the 19th century intersects with the Great Game between the British Empire and Tibet.

Dai's aesthetic strategy can be termed **mytho-realism**. She uses the tools of realistic fiction—detailed descriptions of the landscape, customs, and daily life of the Adi and Mishmi people—but infuses them with a cosmological worldview. The natural world is not a mere backdrop; it is animate, filled with spirits and omens. This approach challenges the positivist, documentary style of colonial historiography. Where the British colonial records reduce Gomang Bo and Kajinsha to footnotes or "troublesome natives," Dai's novel restores their interiority, their motivations, their loves, and their tragic fate.

Key Analysis:

Challenging the Archive: The novel begins by acknowledging the silence in official records: "This is a true story. But no one knows the truth anymore." Dai's project is to fill this archival void with imagination grounded in cultural truth. The realism here is not about factual accuracy but about emotional and cultural verisimilitude.

The Land as Protagonist: The social reality Dai depicts is inextricable from the geography of the Siang valley. The rivers, mountains, and forests are active agents in the narrative. This embodies a subaltern perspective that views land not as a territory to be mapped and conquered (the colonial view) but as a sacred, life-giving entity.

The Subaltern as Historical Agent: By centering the story on the friendship and journey of the two tribesmen, Dai presents the subaltern not as a passive victim of history but as an active agent whose decisions have profound consequences. Their story becomes a metaphor for the region's long history of navigating external influences.

4. Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*: Intimate Realism and the Everyday of Conflict

If Dai uses myth to access history, Easterine Kire, a Naga writer, employs a stark, unadorned realism to document the recent, painful past of the Naga struggle. *Bitter Wormwood* follows the life of a man named Mose and his family across three generations, from the heady early days of Naga independence to the brutal counter-insurgency operations by the Indian state.

Kire's great achievement is her focus on the **intimate, domestic sphere of conflict**. While political narratives focus on leaders, treaties, and battles, Kire shows how war permeates the most private aspects of life: childbirth, love, friendship, and death. This is social realism at its most potent—it humanizes a conflict often reduced to statistics.

Key Analysis:

- **The Gendered Gaze:** Kire's realism is distinctly gendered. She details the specific burdens borne by Naga women: waiting for husbands and sons who may never return, foraging for food during curfews, preserving culture through songs and stories, and bearing the psychological trauma of constant fear. This perspective is the subaltern voice within the subaltern Naga narrative.
- **Documenting Trauma:** The novel's style is deliberately matter-of-fact, even when describing horrific events like village burnings and torture. This narrative restraint makes the events more powerful, avoiding melodrama and instead presenting trauma as a brutal, normalized part of everyday existence. The title itself, *Bitter Wormwood*, a herb known for its medicinal yet bitter taste, encapsulates this reality—a life of suffering endured with resilience.

- **Moral Ambiguity:** Kire's realism refuses to paint a simplistic picture of heroes and villains. She shows the complexity within the Naga movement, including inter-factional violence, and the human faces on the "other side," such as a kind Indian soldier. This nuanced portrayal challenges monolithic nationalist narratives from both sides.

5. Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head*: Urban Realism and the Psychology of Liminality

Anjum Hasan's work shifts the focus from the village and the conflict zone to the urban center of Shillong. Her novel explores the lives of three characters—a PhD student, a college girl, and a civil servant—each grappling with their identity in a city marked by ethnic tension between the tribal Khasi majority and the non-tribal "outsiders."

Hasan's mode is **psychological and urban realism**. She is less concerned with large-scale political events and more with the internal, psychological landscape of her characters who inhabit a liminal space. They are neither fully integrated into their traditional tribal cultures nor are they part of a mainstream Indian identity. This in-betweenness is the central social reality of her fiction.

Key Analysis:

The City as a Microcosm: Shillong in Hasan's novel is a character in itself—a beautiful but tense city where identity is constantly policed. The social realism here captures the subtle codes of interaction, the slights, the anxieties, and the yearning for escape that define life in this multi-ethnic urban space.

The "Insider-Outsider" Dynamic: Hasan brilliantly explores the subaltern status of the non-tribal Indian in the Northeast, a perspective often overlooked. Simultaneously, she shows the anxieties of the tribal youth, who feel marginalized within the larger Indian nation and are struggling to preserve their culture in a globalizing world. This creates a complex web of subalternities.

Alienation and Aspiration: The "lunacy" in the title refers to the psychological turmoil of her characters. Their realities are shaped by intellectual aspirations, romantic desires, and a deep sense of alienation. Hasan's realism captures the texture of this modern, existential discontent, linking the specific socio-political context of Shillong to universal themes of belonging and identity.

6. Synthesis and Discussion: The Distinctive Aesthetics of a Subaltern Realism

Analyzing these three writers together reveals the contours of a distinctive aesthetic paradigm. While their techniques vary, their project is unified in its commitment to giving voice to the intersectional subaltern experience.

This Northeast women's social realism is characterized by:

1. **Polyvocality:** It incorporates multiple voices—mythical, historical, male, female, urban, rural—to create a chorus that resists a single, authoritative narrative.
2. **Spatial Consciousness:** The setting—be it the mythic hills of Arunachal, the conflict-scarred villages of Nagaland, or the tense streets of Shillong—is never passive. It is a constitutive element of social reality and identity.
3. **The Gendered Everyday:** It insists on the importance of the domestic and the everyday as legitimate sites for understanding large political conflicts, a perspective traditionally feminized and dismissed.
4. **A Resistance to Simplification:** It embraces ambiguity, complexity, and contradiction, refusing to reduce the lived experience of the region to simplistic binaries of oppressor/victim or tradition/modernity.

This realism is thus a decolonial tool. It writes back against the exoticization of the Northeast in mainstream Indian media and literature, presenting it instead as a place of profound human complexity, historical depth, and resilient spirit.

7. Conclusion

The English fiction written by women from Northeast India represents a significant and sophisticated evolution of the social realist tradition. By integrating the theoretical concerns of subaltern and feminist studies, writers like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Anjum Hasan have crafted an **intersectional realism** that is uniquely equipped to capture the multifaceted realities of their region. Through Dai's mytho-historical recuperation, Kire's intimate chronicling of conflict, and Hasan's psychological mapping of urban anxiety, they demonstrate that social realism is not a rigid, Eurocentric model but a flexible and potent aesthetic.

Their work proves that the subaltern *can* speak, and does so with eloquence, power, and nuance. They have created a literary space where the specificities of the Northeast—its histories of resistance, its cultural vibrancy, and its deep wounds—are recorded, mourned, and celebrated. This body of work is not just a contribution to Indian Writing in English; it is an essential corrective to it, demanding that the national literary canon expand to accommodate the truths of its peripheries. The social realism of these women writers is, ultimately, an act of testimony and an affirmation of life in the face of overwhelming silence and erasure.

8. References (Selected)

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