

Biology vis-à-vis Culture: Representation of Women in Northeast Indian Literature

Dr. I.Talisenla Imsong^{1*}, Dr Subhashis Banerjee², Tiajungla Longchar³,

^{1*}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University (A Central University), Nagaland, India

Email: talisenla@nagalanduniversity.ac.in

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University (A Central University), Nagaland, India

Email: subhashis@nagalanduniversity.ac.in

³Research Scholar, Department of English, Nagaland University (A Central University), Nagaland, India.

Email: tiajungla1997@gmail.com

Keywords	Abstract
Gender, Northeast Indian literature, Cultural representation, Patriarchy, Female agency	The representation of women in Northeast Indian literature reflects the complex interplay between biological determinism and cultural constructs. While biological factors often dictate gendered experiences, cultural frameworks shape the identity, agency, and social roles of women in the region. This paper examines how women are portrayed in selected Northeast Indian literary works, focusing on their negotiations between tradition and modernity, patriarchy and autonomy, and nature and nurture. By analyzing texts from prominent writers such as Indira Goswami, Mamang Dai, and Temsula Ao, this study highlights the tensions between biological essentialism and cultural influence in defining women's experiences. Through a close reading of primary sources, the paper reveals how literature becomes a space for contesting, redefining, and asserting female identity in Northeast India.

Introduction

The Northeast Indian literary tradition offers a distinctive and profound lens through which to examine the intersections of biology and culture in shaping gender identity. Women in this region navigate a complex and dynamic landscape marked by diverse ethnic communities, colonial legacies, socio-political conflicts, and traditional patriarchal norms. Unlike mainstream Indian feminism, which often engages with gender discourse from a more homogenized or pan-Indian perspective, Northeast Indian literature emerges from a space where gender identity is intricately woven into the fabric of indigenous customs, oral traditions, and resistance narratives. As a result, literature from this region serves as a crucial site of exploration for understanding how deeply embedded social structures interact with biological determinism to define women's roles, experiences, and representations. This paper critically examines how select literary works from Northeast India engage with and challenge essentialist views of gender while situating women in the broader cultural, social, and historical contexts of the region. The conventional notion of gender, often constructed through a rigid binary of male and female roles, is problematized in these texts, revealing the fluidity and multiplicity of gender identities shaped by historical oppression, community structures, and socio-political movements. Essentialist views of gender posit that biological sex determines one's identity, behaviour, and societal role. However, literature from Northeast India frequently subverts this deterministic framework, portraying women not as passive recipients of cultural and biological imperatives but as active agents negotiating their subjectivity within and against existing structures of power. The interplay of colonialism and gender identity in Northeast India cannot be overlooked. British colonial rule imposed external patriarchal frameworks that often clashed with indigenous gender roles, leading to shifts in women's positions within their communities. Pre-colonial societies in many parts of Northeast India had fluid gender roles and, in some cases, more egalitarian structures than those introduced under colonial administration.

The imposition of European legal systems, Christianity, and economic policies reconfigured social hierarchies, often reinforcing gender oppression and marginalization. Literary texts from the region reflect these transformations, critiquing the ways in which colonialism compounded gendered subjugation while also serving as a catalyst for resistance and redefinition of gender roles. The influence of indigenous traditions and customary laws further complicates the discourse on gender identity. While many indigenous communities in Northeast India historically practiced matrilineal inheritance systems, such as the Khasi and Garo tribes of Meghalaya, matrilineality does not necessarily translate into matriarchy. Women, despite being inheritors of

property, often do not wield actual political or decision-making power, which remains concentrated in male hands. Literature from the region frequently engages with these contradictions, exposing the paradox of matrilineality where women are both central and peripheral to their socio-economic structures. Through literary analysis, this paper will explore the ways in which authors critique and deconstruct these indigenous patriarchal frameworks while envisioning alternative possibilities for gender equity. The socio-political conflicts that have long plagued Northeast India further complicate gender identity. Armed insurgencies, ethnic conflicts, and militarization—exacerbated by draconian laws such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)—have had a profound impact on women's lives. Women often bear the brunt of state and insurgent violence, facing displacement, sexual violence, and socio-economic marginalization. Yet, Northeast Indian literature does not merely portray women as victims of conflict but also as agents of resistance. Many literary works foreground the narratives of women who engage in political activism, community leadership, and insurgency, thereby challenging the passive victimhood often associated with women in conflict zones. The literary representation of these women subverts traditional notions of femininity, offering new frameworks for understanding gendered agency in conflict-ridden landscapes.

Furthermore, Northeast Indian literature interrogates the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. While caste dynamics in Northeast India differ from those in mainland India, issues of tribal identity, land ownership, and economic disparity significantly shape women's lived experiences. Many literary works critique the exploitation of indigenous women by both state and non-state actors, addressing themes of environmental degradation, displacement, and economic precarity. Women's narratives in these texts often highlight the impact of capitalist expansion and resource extraction on indigenous communities, demonstrating how economic structures intersect with gendered oppression. By engaging with these themes, the literature provides a nuanced understanding of how gender identity is co-constructed with broader socio-economic forces. Oral traditions and folklore, integral to the literary heritage of Northeast India, also play a critical role in shaping and challenging gender norms. Many indigenous stories, myths, and folktales feature strong female protagonists who defy patriarchal conventions, offering alternative models of gender roles. At the same time, some oral traditions reinforce restrictive norms by depicting women in roles of domesticity and subservience. Contemporary writers frequently reimagine these folktales, rewriting them from feminist perspectives to challenge patriarchal narratives and reclaim indigenous histories.

This paper will explore how these literary interventions transform traditional storytelling into a site of gender resistance and redefinition. The linguistic diversity of Northeast Indian literature also shapes its approach to gender discourse. With over 200 languages spoken in the region, literature is produced in multiple languages, including Assamese, Manipuri, Khasi, Mizo, and English. The use of language in these texts reflects the negotiation of gender identity within specific cultural and linguistic contexts. Some writers choose to write in indigenous languages to preserve cultural specificity, while others use English as a tool of broader engagement and resistance against mainstream Indian literary hegemonies. The linguistic choices in these works are not merely stylistic but deeply political, influencing how gender narratives are framed and disseminated. In critically engaging with Northeast Indian literature, it is essential to recognize the role of women writers and their contributions to feminist discourse. Writers such as Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, and Mitra Phukan have brought forth powerful narratives that challenge gendered oppression while celebrating the resilience of women.

Their works often blend history, memory, and personal testimonies to construct multi-layered portrayals of women's lives. These writers not only document gendered struggles but also offer visions of empowerment and transformation, making their literary contributions pivotal to the discourse on gender in Northeast India. Ultimately, this paper seeks to move beyond simplistic binaries of victimhood and empowerment, instead foregrounding the complex and multifaceted ways in which gender identity is negotiated in Northeast Indian literature. By critically analyzing themes of colonialism, indigenous traditions, socio-political conflict, economic structures, oral traditions, language, and feminist resistance, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the region's unique literary engagements with gender. In doing so, it underscores the significance of Northeast Indian literature as a vital space for challenging essentialist notions of gender and envisioning new possibilities for gender justice and equity.

Biology and Gender Determinism in Northeast Indian Literature

The biological construct of gender has often been employed to justify patriarchal norms that marginalize women in various societies, including those of Northeast India. Traditional beliefs regarding reproductive roles, physical strength, and inherent emotional attributes have contributed to the rigid gender expectations reflected in literature. However, Northeast Indian literature also disrupts these deterministic ideas by showcasing women who transcend their biological roles to carve independent identities. For instance, Indira Goswami's *The Moth Eaten Howdah of a Tusker* (2004) presents the struggles of Brahmin widows in Assam who, despite their biological realities, are subjected to severe cultural restrictions. The protagonist, Giribala, finds herself entrapped by both her physicality and the oppressive cultural norms that dictate widowhood as a state of social death. This novel critiques the cultural reinforcement of biological determinism while highlighting the resilience of women who challenge these norms. Similarly, Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) explores indigenous traditions in Arunachal Pradesh, where women are often seen as custodians of cultural continuity. While their biological roles as mothers and nurturers are emphasized, the narrative complicates this by depicting female characters who assert agency within and beyond their biological functions. Dai's work problematizes the notion of gender as a fixed biological reality, portraying it instead as a dynamic interplay of tradition, personal agency, and societal constraints.

Culture and the Social Construction of Womanhood

In contrast to biological determinism, cultural theories posit that gender is socially constructed, with literature serving as a medium for both reinforcing and resisting these constructions. The cultural expectations imposed upon women in Northeast India are deeply embedded in customs, oral traditions, and communal histories. However, literature also offers alternative narratives that challenge restrictive gender norms and envision new possibilities for female existence. Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) delves into the experiences of Naga women amidst conflict and displacement. The collection presents women who, despite being culturally conditioned to be passive and subservient, emerge as agents of resilience and survival. The intersection of gender and ethnicity in Ao's stories underscores how cultural identity shapes but does not entirely determine a woman's agency. Similarly, Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) critiques the oppressive matrilineal traditions of the Angami Naga community. While the matrilineal structure ostensibly grants women greater authority, the novel reveals how cultural norms still subjugate young girls to strict familial and social expectations. The protagonist, Dielieno, navigates a system that paradoxically grants and denies power to women based on cultural traditions rather than biological realities.

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Women as Cultural Mediators

Northeast Indian literature often portrays women as mediators between tradition and modernity, reflecting the region's socio-cultural flux. While they are deeply rooted in traditional practices, many female protagonists challenge patriarchal structures to claim modern identities. This negotiation is crucial in understanding how biology and culture intersect in defining womanhood. For instance, in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), the character of Firdaus, an ambitious young woman from Shillong, struggles against cultural expectations that seek to confine her within gendered norms. Her aspirations and personal dilemmas highlight the tensions between cultural heritage and modernity, illustrating how women in Northeast India continuously redefine their identities. Hasan's work emphasizes the psychological and emotional turmoil that accompanies the desire to break free from gendered constraints, portraying female subjectivity as fluid and resistant to rigid categorization.

Additionally, Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005) presents a compelling portrait of Rukmini, a woman caught between her role as the wife of a high-ranking government official and her personal quest for fulfillment. Set against the backdrop of Assam's insurgency, the novel interrogates how sociopolitical unrest impacts women differently than men. Phukan's protagonist is not merely a passive observer of the political turmoil; instead, she actively engages with and critiques the structures that confine her. The novel underscores the intricate ways in which tradition and modernity coexist and conflict within the lives of Northeast Indian women, revealing their struggles to carve a space for autonomy and self-determination.

The region's oral traditions and folklore further contribute to the discourse on gender, often offering complex representations of femininity. While many indigenous folktales reinforce traditional gender roles, some provide counter-narratives where women defy patriarchal expectations. In contemporary literature, writers frequently reinterpret these stories, challenging the historical portrayal of women as passive beings. This reclamation of

folklore through a feminist lens allows for the subversion of longstanding patriarchal ideologies and creates new spaces for female empowerment in literary narratives.

Women's resistance and resilience are central to Northeast Indian literature, particularly in contexts of conflict, displacement, and militarization. The region has been fraught with political instability, armed insurgencies, and state violence, all of which have had profound gendered implications. Women in these settings often bear the brunt of violence but simultaneously emerge as strong, resourceful figures who navigate survival and resistance. The narratives of women in conflict zones—whether as victims, activists, or insurgents—add layers of complexity to gender discourse, highlighting the interplay between socio-political oppression and female agency. The literature of the region thus becomes a crucial site for understanding how gender operates within and against structures of power.

Conclusion

The representation of women in Northeast Indian literature underscores the intricate relationship between biology and culture. While biological determinism has historically been used to justify gender roles, cultural constructs have equally contributed to shaping and challenging these norms. Through literary narratives, women's experiences in the region are portrayed as dynamic and evolving, resisting both biological essentialism and cultural orthodoxy. The selected works analyzed in this paper illustrate how literature becomes a critical site for contesting, redefining, and asserting female identity. Ultimately, Northeast Indian literature offers a nuanced perspective on womanhood that transcends rigid binaries of biology and culture, emphasizing female agency and resilience in the face of socio-cultural constraints. By examining these texts through a critical feminist lens, it becomes evident that gender is neither a static nor a biologically determined reality but rather a constantly shifting construct influenced by historical, cultural, and political forces. These narratives not only document the struggles faced by women in the region but also serve as powerful instruments of resistance and transformation. In doing so, they contribute significantly to the broader discourse on gender and identity, challenging essentialist perspectives and advocating for more inclusive understandings of womanhood. The complexities of Northeast Indian literature demonstrate that gender identity in the region is far from monolithic; rather, it is a constantly evolving phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, socio-political struggles, and individual acts of defiance. These works provide invaluable insights into the ways in which women negotiate their identities, resisting and reshaping the cultural and biological narratives that seek to define them. As such, they remain instrumental in the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice, offering alternative paradigms that honour the agency and resilience of women in Northeast India.

Works Cited

1. Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Zubaan, 2006.
2. Dai, Mamang. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin, 2006.
3. Goswami, Indira. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*. Katha, 2004.
4. Hasan, Anjum. *Lunatic in My Head*. Penguin, 2007.
5. Kire, Easterine. *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Zubaan, 2007.