

Uncertain Identities: Contemporary Voices from the Periphery

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Abstract

Writing often serves as a subversive act, particularly when undertaken from marginalised positions. The emergence of Northeast Writings in English within the wider canon of Indian writing in English is a recent phenomenon, dating to the 1980s and 1990s. Although many contemporary writers writing in English from this region are first-generation authors, they have established themselves as significant and influential, particularly by articulating regional concerns and perspectives in their writing. Despite this recognition of Northeast poetry, the people of the region living in mainland India continue to suffer from an identity crisis. This paper will analyse selected works by contemporary Northeast poets who address the complex issue of identity, with a particular focus on Northeast identity. Employing a dual framework that combines the social identity approach and theories of othering, this paper, through close textual analysis, will trace boundaries between 'self' and 'other', demonstrating how constructed identities that perpetuate othering through the mechanisms of stereotyping and discrimination are addressed and resisted in the works. Ultimately, this paper contends that these poets are not simply engaging in "art for art's sake," rather, they actively articulate demands for acceptance and inclusion, transforming themselves into poetic voices of resistance.

Keywords: Northeast poets, identity, Northeast identity, otherisation, resistance.

Introduction

Northeast India comprises eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura—and Sikkim, which joined the region more recently. Even though the area is home to many languages and ethnic groups, the term 'Northeast' usually evokes a single, simplified image. As Vandenhelsken and Karlsson observe, "Northeast India is typically discussed as a frontier; distant and different" (331), and, as such, the region receives national media attention only during elections, major political events, major natural disasters, or insurgency. At other times, stories about culture, daily life, or general issues in the Northeast rarely appear on national TV. For example, Indian television mostly ignored the recent Manipur crisis for months, covering it widely after a video showing the parade of two Kuki women allegedly raped and assaulted went viral.

The neglect of the Northeast, even as India approaches its 80th Independence Day, has

contributed to the feelings of alienation and perceptions of being treated as outsiders by the rest of the country. Individuals from the Northeast who relocate to urban mainland India regularly face racial discrimination, stereotyping, derogatory labelling, and, at times, a lack of acceptance as Indian citizens by mainlanders (Pulla et al.). This is exemplified through the recent news reports, such as the racial abuse of three Arunachali women in Delhi's Malviya Nagar (TOI City Desk), the fatal attack on Anjel Chakma in Dehradun, Uttarakhand (HT News Desk), and the harassment of a dance group from Arunachal Pradesh at Patna railway station (Rumi). In response, the Supreme Court of India, in the *Alana Golmei vs. Union of India* writ petition, issued an order in February 2026, mandating that a committee established by the Ministry of Home Affairs convene regularly to address racial discrimination against people from the Northeast (Mishra). As a result, scholars working on identity studies have explored these intergroup dynamics apparent in the Northeast, which are vital to understanding identity politics. Building on this, the present paper examines the Northeast Indians' unsettled relations with mainstream India and explains the workings of the politics of identity through an analysis of selected works by contemporary Northeast poets that address identity and otherisation.

Theoretical Background

Dictionaries define 'identity' as the qualities, beliefs, personality, appearance, or expressions that distinguish a person or group. This paper's thesis is that identity is neither fixed nor inherent. Rather, it is dynamic, evolving as individuals and groups interact, thereby creating and contesting boundaries and negotiating interactions between personal and group affiliations, as posited by the social identity approach.

The Social Identity Theory began with Tajfel, who defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (63). This means being part of a group gives people a sense of where they fit in society and sets expectations for how they should behave. Tajfel argued that social identity, more than personal identity, shapes how people act within groups. Later, Turner and his colleagues elaborated on the cognitive processes of social categorisation, social identification and social comparison as relevant to social identification. In doing so, they showed that "the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups" (374), which explains social categorisation, is enough to trigger intergroup responses that lead to favouring the dominant in-group and discriminating against the out-group. Together, these developments formed the unified social identity approach. The approach also explained how people can have many identities at once, such as national, ethnic, gender, religious, or class, by grouping themselves with others. It further specified how people interpret their position in different social contexts. Postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall, in his "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" states,

"Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation." (4)

He further explains that identities are defined by society being "constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies."

As such, the identities emerge within the power play and "are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of identical, naturally-constituted unity", thereby resulting in othering. (Hall "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" 4) In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall describes the "play of 'difference' within identity"

(228), explaining how othering occurs when the psychological out-group described in SIT is subjected to negative cultural stereotypes. Palacios reiterates that this creates an 'other' which is a basic part of forming group identity, leading to favouritism for the in-group and bias or prejudice against outsiders (27). The Social identity approach demonstrates how the processes of identifying and separating groups are vital to understanding the dynamics of the politics of identity and how it leads to othering.

In the context of Northeast India, Sanjib Baruah, a leading scholar of the region's politics, examines in his book "In the Name of the Nation" how the history and politics of colonial and post-colonial Northeast India shaped what he describes as an 'invented region' (25–46). Baruah states, "Northeast India is a postcolonial coinage that took root in the 1970s. Unlike informal or vernacular names like North India or South India...Northeast India is an officially organised and named region" (1). As such he clarifies that the term "Northeast" originated as a colonial construct introduced by British administrators for administrative purposes, and was later maintained as a political and bureaucratic category by the Indian state after independence. Evidence of this is found in the post-independence era, when the two wars with China and Pakistan, followed by the armed rebellion in various parts of the Northeast region, led to the Indian Parliament passing two Acts—the Northeastern Areas (Re-organisation) Act and the North Eastern Council Act—in the last week of 1971. Over time, Northeast became an official category and was used liberally by policymakers, security analysts, the media, academics, and various institutions and organisations.

English literature from the region evolved in the 1980s and 1990s, when Jayanta Mahapatra, then the editor of the Sunday supplement of 'The Telegraph,' discovered the Shillong poets and considered them unique voices, distinct from those of mainland India. This recognition of English writings from the Northeast led to the emergence of 'Northeast Writings in English' as a distinct category within Indian English Literature. While Pou states that "this body of literature from the region" is "identified as one or a sub-genre or a regional literature by virtue of it being from a unique geographical location" (75), Mara Matta from the University of Rome states that she uses the term 'Northeast literature' as a practical label for an indigenous literary tradition (200). Despite this debate, it is important to note that the Northeast construct entered literature first.

The Northeast identity came into being when North-easterners, following the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s, migrated in large numbers to mainland Indian cities. Baruah notes the emergence of "an incipient Northeastern identity coming into existence in recent years" (1). This homogenised Northeast identity imposed on people from the region who moved to mainland India for work or education arose from a mix of group dynamics and the Northeast's geographic isolation from mainland India, which is connected to it via a thin stretch of land known as the 'Chicken's Neck'. Drawing on the Social Identity approach helps explain how urban populations in mainland India often saw the diverse Northeast migrants as a single group classified on the basis of physical differences, particularly their mongoloid features. This created a divide between the in-group and out-group, resulting in the imposition of Northeast identity, leading to their otherisation and discrimination, wherein they are not regarded as Indian citizens but are treated as foreigners or aliens.

To illustrate the imposition of the Northeast identity, Gertrude Lamare, in her article "India is not my cup of Tea," recounts, "I was really conscious of the ascribed 'North-East identity' only when I left Shillong for her studies in Delhi. This testimony demonstrates the process of identity imposition, wherein physical appearance becomes a marker of difference in urban settings, supporting the psychological processes outlined in the Social Identity approach, whereby visible traits are used to designate out-group status.

While focusing on the social identity approach and theories of othering, it is also important to consider other postcolonial theories that help explain how colonial history and ongoing power structures shape identity and perpetuate the marginalisation of the Northeast. For example, Gertrude Lamare's experience of being labelled as 'Indian,' 'Northeast,' and 'Tribal' reflects how colonial and postcolonial systems use categorisation and mapping, which connects to Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity—spaces where imposed and self-made identities meet. Gayatri Spivak's work on the silenced voices of the subaltern is also important as narratives from and about the Northeast region are often missing from national discussions.

Methodology

For methodological clarity, this paper will attempt to trace the evolution of the Northeast construct. Adopting an integrated framework of the social identity approach and theories of othering, the paper will use a close textual analysis to study the select works by influential contemporary poets from various Northeast states and communities that address identity construction, particularly Northeast identity and the resultant effects of marginalisation, stereotyping, and exclusion, revealing literary interrogations. First, the social identity approach will examine how poets depict group connections and illustrate the formation and discussion of the 'Northeast identity' in literature. Second, the theories of othering will be utilised to explain how literature delineates boundaries between 'self' and 'other', thereby revealing how exclusion is reinforced or contested within Indian society. The paper thus aims to demonstrate how literature plays an important role in addressing the dynamics of the politics of identity, and in doing so, conveys the urgent need for inclusion and acceptance, especially in the global context.

Critical Analysis: Select Works of Contemporary Northeast Poets

To illustrate the process of identity construction, let us look at the simple question: "Who are you?" The answer to this question encountered by individuals and social groups alike serves as a point of entry into this study of identity formation. In this context, the poem "Who We Are" by contemporary Shillong poet Gertrude Lamare, composed during her studies in Delhi, is an answer to the above question. As she illustrates the conceptualisation of identity in this poem, she reveals that an individual's identity is 'fractured and fragmented' as reflected in the lines:

"I thought I was human
Until you arrived and called me Girl
.....
Until you wrote me down on paper
And said I had a name- Indian.
.....
Then you came and kept me in a box for safety,
And told me I was more, I was Tribe.
.....
But you cartographed our bodies
Into "zones of exception" and called them States."
(Lamare, "WHO WE ARE")

These lines reveal that Gertrude Lamare's biological birth and gender initiate the social processes shaping her identity. The layered identities of "Girl," "Indian," and "Tribe" reveal the ongoing redefinition of the self within power structures. Lamare's use of externally directed verbs such as "called," "wrote," and "kept" foregrounds the imposition of identity by authority. The phrase "kept in a box for safety" metaphorically suggests superficial protection and actual restriction

by a physical and symbolic enclosure. The reference to cartography shows that it operates both as an act of territorial inscription (zones) and as a means of external classification (states), thereby transforming individuals into administrative subjects. These references illustrate how national, tribal, and state affiliations are imposed through mapping, categorisation, and naming, conferring conditional recognition and fostering otherisation. The analysis of Lamare's poem exemplifies how institutional power shapes personal and group identities. As such, it underscores theories of identity formation that argue identity is essentially shaped by social and cultural forces, supporting the thesis that the constructed 'Northeast identity' imposed by mainlanders results from social categorisation and the resulting otherisation, reinforcing boundaries within the Indian nation.

Furthermore, this poem illustrates that while national membership confers an Indian identity, tribal affiliation and belonging to Meghalaya, a tribal state in Northeast India, result in experiences of containment and marginalisation, as symbolised by references to 'a box' and 'zones of exception'. Thus, the poem reflects the internalisation of increasingly complex identity politics that contribute to a divided world and the perpetuation of othering. In yet another poem, "NATIONED," Lamare shows how the process of Indian identity construction, initially appears to empower the individual by conferring a legal Indian identity, legitimising belonging as she states:

"Written, numbered and registered
In the folds of your fabric

....
My eyes open—
To an identity—
I-N-D-I-A-N"

(Lamare, "NATIONED")

However, in the subsequent lines she exposes the individual to constraints and exclusion, as evident in the subsequent lines:

"A title planted by one law
Cancelled by another" (Lamare, "NATIONED")

The above lines reveal Lamare's protests as to how her being a tribal from the Northeast functions leads to an imposed identity construct such that it constrains and cancels the Indian identity bestowed on her as per constitutional law. In doing so she highlights how people from the Northeast, though legally Indian citizens, are often seen as lesser Indians by those from the mainland. Larinkima "Seiji" Ralte, a contemporary Mizo poet, also captures this feeling of alienation and discrimination experienced by people from the Northeast in the poem "Yellow". As Seiji himself states, the poem "written on the 70th anniversary of India's Republic Day" (Ralte) captures the feelings of a marginalised North-easterner as he states:

"A land belongs to its people,
& people like us —
who are alienated, segregated
and isolated in these hinterlands.

...
We are its illegitimate brother,

....
And a conflate
of brown & yellow can never
become something nice.
Though we too,

chant 'Jai Hind', our voices
fade in the midst of
disdain and discrimination

...
But we too
sing 'Vande Mataram'
& pledge our allegiance
to the Tiranga," (Ralte)

The lines above reveal that the people of the Northeast, whom the poet describes as isolated in the hinterlands, regard themselves as India's illegitimate brother. Further, the poet shows how the politics of identity has created boundaries of difference between the binary groups, particularly by referring to mainland Indians and Northeast Indians as brown and yellow, respectively, to convey differences in skin and physical features. By highlighting these contrasts, the poet suggests that the Indian identity is constructed by drawing some in and pushing others to the margins, revealing how sameness and difference fuel othering, such that though the people of the Northeast pledge their loyalty to the nation and sing the national anthem and song, they are still discriminated against and suffer the pain of exclusion.

Questioning the idea of what an Indian should look like to be accepted as an Indian contemporary poet, Cherrie L. Chhangte, in her poem, "What does an Indian Look Like?" particularly poses the question from the position of the 'other'- the North-easterner. She begins by presenting India as a land of unity in diversity, but she quickly interrogates this claim, as evident in the lines: "Are we as proud of our unity/ As we are proud of our diversity" (Chhangte 75). In doing so, she questions whether this is a false claim, one found only in tourist brochures and intended to attract customers. Thereby, she brilliantly juxtaposes the lived reality of discrimination with the region's idealised marketing. This lived reality is evident in the shared experience of racism that the Northeast people suffer in mainland India, as is evident in the following lines:

"You look at me, and you see
My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith
You dissect my past, analyse my present
Predict my future and build my profile
I am a curiosity, an 'ethnic specimen'" (Chhangte 75)

While revealing how North-easterners are not only pushed to the margins and regarded as outsiders by the mainland, she points out subtly that they are judged for their differences. However, in her refusal to accept the label of 'ethnic specimen', she confronts stereotypes, racial profiling, and discrimination head-on and boldly reclaims the Indian identity, declaring, "An Indian looks like me, an Indian is Me" (Chhangte 75).

This same resistance can be noted in Malsawmi Jacob's poem "Identities", where she describes her experiences living in Bangalore and those "from palm tree land by the sea/give me such strange looks/like I don't belong to the same earth" (197) question and ask her:

"Where are you from?" you ask
not my name not who I am
but what root or shoot I sprang from" (Jacob 197)

In explaining herself, she not only asserts that she is not a lesser Indian even though she looks different and comes from the hills of the Northeast, but she also draws attention to the concept of 'shared origin' as she states:

"Perhaps at dawn of history
the sisters, your ancestor and mine
parted ways and travelled

different directions
yours stopped on the flat land
mine climbed up the hills" (Jacob 197)

By referring to the shared origin before people journeyed to different lands, Jacob seems to suggest that we trace our roots to the same maternal ancestor, and, as such, she urges inclusion and acceptance. Esther Syiem, like Jacob, also questions the notion of North-easterners as perpetual 'others' in her poem "To the rest of India from another Indian." As Syiem depicts the region's many ethnic and tribal groups, each with its own languages and cultures, she also notes the religious differences of the Northeast from those of mainland India. However, despite the differences, she urges the need to embrace and accept as she states:

"if you should
twist your tongues around ours
as we learnt to twist ours around yours,
you'll get a taste of
webbed legends."

(Syiem "To the rest of India from another Indian")

Another poet who has raised questions about racism and tribal identity is Yumlam Tana, a prominent poetic voice of Arunachal Pradesh. In the poem, "When an Indian from the Mainland Is Knifed in Australia", Tana describes the apathetic attitude and indifference of the mainlanders towards the suffering of the Northeast people in the following lines:

"But when a fellow Indian from the north-east is mugged
Or beaten to death in the streets
Of Delhi, Pune, and Bangalore city,
Why is the rest of India so silent?" (Tana 31)

In reference to the victims of mindless violence in the cities, like 'Nido Tania,' a twenty-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, in 2014, who died as a result of physical assault, he exposes the othering and racial discrimination faced by the Northeast people in mainland India. In doing so, Tana critiques the media houses and mainland India's lack of deep concern, as evidenced by the reactive approach. On the other hand, Tana points out that when an Indian is abused or assaulted in a distant country, a nationwide hue and cry is raised, and the media gets active. This reaction by the media reveals an important aspect of the complex politics of identity and the spatial context that determines an identity's prominence. It may be noted that outside the borders of the Indian nation, a shared Indian national identity takes precedence, bonding diverse backgrounds under one common flag, whereas within India, our rich regional, linguistic, and cultural differences come to the forefront. Such prejudice hurts the poet and makes him state:

"There cannot be intolerance and hatred –
There cannot be malice or prejudice.
Man from the mainland India,
We seek an answer." (Tana 33)

Through this poem, Tana also challenges the idea that India is free of racism. While racism is often linked to Western countries, where Indians abroad may feel discriminated against, many Indians at home do not acknowledge the racism faced by people from Northeast India. These people are often seen as foreigners or lesser Indians, which leads to their discrimination and marginalisation.

By addressing these themes, the selected contemporary poets articulate rhythms of resistance and advocate for an India that celebrates unity in diversity. Through their works, these poets echo the perspective articulated by Amartya Sen:

“The prospect for peace in the contemporary world may well lie in the recognition of the plurality of our affiliations and in the use of reasoning as common inhabitants of the wide world, rather than making us into inmates, rigidly incarcerated into little containers” (xvii).

Significantly, this analysis of select works of contemporary Northeast poets reveals not just othering and discrimination faced by North-easterners in the mainland, but also the reversed othering that exists within the Northeast itself. Esther Syiem, one of the poets discussed earlier, in her poem entitled “of A Terrifying Glimpse from a Passing Taxi (mid 1960’s)” states: “For ‘walking around with dkhar’ from the alien plains” (29)

As such, she shows that migrants from other parts of India who come to the Northeast and settle here are branded as outsiders, with labels such as ‘dkhar,’ ‘Vai,’ ‘Mayang’ and ‘Nyipak’ imposed on them. This reveals that group boundaries are constantly drawn and redrawn within the spatial social context, thereby shifting the boundaries of belonging and resulting in this reversed othering within the Northeast. In voicing out for those that are otherised the Northeast poets show their commitment as voices that urge for inclusion and acceptance. Further, the reversed othering also reveals the complex interplay of power and space, and in order to understand these complex identity politics in the Northeast, we must adopt careful, context-sensitive approaches that consider both external marginalisation and internal exclusions, thereby calling for a critical and more exhaustive study.

Conclusion

By combining the social identity approach and theories of othering, this analysis of the poetry of Northeast writers unravels the complexities of identity, stereotyping, and discrimination, and illuminates the region’s ongoing marginalisation while advocating for inclusion. This analysis of contemporary Northeast poets demonstrates that their poems not only critique imposed identities but also serve as representations of personal, regional, and national narratives, exposing processes of othering and envisioning pathways toward inclusion. Further, the recognition of these contemporary Northeast poets within the ambit of Northeast writing, and the fact that their poems deal with complex, dynamic identity formations, transform them into poetic voices of resistance that seek inclusion and acceptance.

With regard to the imposed Northeast identity, the analysis reveals that despite many scholars and creative writers arguing that the ‘Northeast identity’ is fundamentally a geographical designation rather than a composite cultural identity for the region’s people (Bargohain and Mokashi-Punekar 3-4). Conversely, Lamare’s narration “India is not my cup of Tea” reveals what McDuié-Ra observes, that there are many differences within the Northeast, however the otherisation they face living in mainland India has brought these communities closer, leading them to perhaps accept the homogenised Northeast identity as they collectively voice their resistance in solidarity while as within the boundaries of the Northeast, these same people ironically identify themselves as different from each other (35).

On the other hand, the debate concerning the categorisation of ‘Northeast writings in English’ within the wider domain of ‘Indian Writing in English’ needs to be interrogated more deeply. The categorisation, along with the inclusion of Northeast Writings in English as a separate course of study in universities, has undoubtedly implied a greater visibility for Northeast writings and writers in the literary arena. However, major Indian literature festivals, exotically presenting writers from this region in a special session (Ahanthem), have raised concerns that it is an unintentional act of marginalisation. Viewing this categorization simplistically seems to imply a homogenising tendency of the diversity of Northeast and a means of marginalisation, while seeking literary reforms by including it in the broader literary canon of Indian writing

raises certain difficulties and may dilute these distinct voices from the periphery. Further, it must be noted that literary categorisation of writings from different parts of the world exists; as such, this particular debate reveals that “the viewing of this literary movement, which has now been canonised as ‘Northeast Literature,’ should be approached with more critical insights” (Prodhani 32). This critical study of canon formation must interrogate how such categorisation may inadvertently replicate the boundaries it seeks to transcend.

To sum up, this paper demonstrates that literary and critical writing play an important role in promoting positive change. Though achieving genuine national unity is a challenge, embracing diversity remains both essential and urgent, particularly in a globalised context. Addressing othering and racial discrimination in India requires a comprehensive approach, including robust constitutional protections, vigilant enforcement, and sustained civil society efforts to promote education and awareness. While the Indian identity may evoke pride internationally, it is equally important to cultivate the spirit of unity in diversity domestically. Until such a vision is realised, poets and writers will continue to play an important role in challenging division and shaping an inclusive nation and world. Additionally, scholars from various disciplines must continue to interrogate the dynamics of identity politics to foster critical, context-sensitive discourse and develop theoretical insights that inform practical pathways for inclusivity. Future research should focus on how emerging literary genres, digital media, or grassroots cultural movements from the Northeast further complicate notions of identity and othering. Comparative studies across other marginal regions within and beyond India would also promote understanding of intersectional identities and contribute to a broader discourse on resistance.

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