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A study of Gender and Identity in Selected Northeast Indian Short Fiction

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Abstract: This paper looks at the representation of gender and identity as shown in selected Northeast Indian short stories through the perspective of Temsula Ao and Janice Pariat, focusing on the journey of the two authors in cognitive dissonance with gender roles, cultural expectations, and personal identity within the socio-political contexts of their various communities. While analysing Ao's *The Jungle Major*, Pariat's *The Secret Corridor*, *An Aerial View*, and Ao's *Soaba*, the paper argues that the two authors show how flexible gender identity intersects with socio-cultural dictates to shape or change individuals' personality. Ultimately, the analysis points out that gender and identity are constructed and contested together in these two brilliant authors' narrative texts.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Northeast Indian Short Stories, Temsula Ao, Janice Pariat.

Introduction to India's Northeast Region

Northeast India, consisting of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is characterized by immense cultural diversity. It is populated by diverse ethnic groups, each of which has preserved its cultural traditions, languages, and customs. As aesthetics point out, "The northeastern region of India is often described as the cultural mosaic of India consisting of diverse tribal communities, linguistic, and ethnic identities" (Bijukumar 24). Linguistic plurality is yet another defining characteristic of Northeast India. Being a great cultural mix, the languages belonging to different linguistic peninsulas, such as Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Austroasiatic, are present in this landmass at varying temporal and spatial odds. According to research, colonial term "Northeast," under which

the 475 distinctly different ethnicities of the eight states are all bundled together, roughly totals around 400 languages/dialects (Das 1).

Northeast Indian literature

Northeast Indian literature is that which states other than Assam and, to some extent, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, etc., narrating a cultural and historical connotation. This part of the country, known for its ethnic diversity and complicated socio-political scenarios, has given birth to a different set of literature that confronts the issues of identity, conflict, and tradition. The medium is the short-story form; it is among the favoured one in which writers from this region explore such multi-dimensional issues in a very concise yet powerfully penetrating method. Writers like Temsula Ao and Janice Pariat well used this format to expose the more nuanced designs of life in the Northeast. Ao's collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from War Zone*, relates many poignant accounts on the milieu of insurgency in Nagaland, capturing the attention and strength of its people. Pariat's *Boats on Land* blends local folk tales with colonial and postcolonial histories, thus providing ever-shifting view within Meghalaya's social changes.

Brief Introduction of Temsula Ao and Janice Pariat

Temsula Ao is an Indian poet, short story writer, and ethnographer from Nagaland. She was a professor of English at North Eastern Hill University. Among the many awards that she has earned is the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Her works are heavily influenced by the questions of identity, displacement, and impact of conflict on the communities in Northeast India.

Janice Pariat is an Indian poet and writer. Born in Assam and raised in Shillong, Meghalaya, her first short story collection, *Boats on Land*, won the Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award for English in 2013 and Fiction Crossword Book Award in 2013.

Gender Identity and Literature

Representation of Gender in Literature is one of the most important influencer of society as it helps shape perceptions and challenge or strengthen stereotypes. From a historical perspective, there are always fewer female characters in literature. According to a study that examined 3,000 books from the Gutenberg Project, male characters are four times more common than female characters, representing a troubling gender disparity in literary works (Kejriwal and Nagaraj). This disparity not only reflects but also perpetuates societal biases,

as audiences take in these portrayals and assimilate them into their understanding of gender dynamics. The terms frequently associated with female characters—such as “weak,” “kind,” and “attractive”—stand in stark contrast to descriptors typically linked to male characters like “leadership,” “authority,” and “strength.” This dichotomy further entrenches conventional gender expectations.

Feminist literary criticism assesses texts based on their fidelity to or opposition against established notions of gender ideology, particularly patriarchy. It interrogates ways that women have been historically marginalized in literary texts, as well as the literary canon, advocating for a questioning of those traditional narratives. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that literature has long held to a binary conception of gender in which women were either pure and angelic or monstrosously transgressive (Gilbert and Gubar).

Judith Butler, intervening here, recasts her conception of gender to displace it from the specificity of fixed types, making gender a performative act held within the binds of culturally derived discourse, as put forth in her work *Gender Trouble*. It produced an impact on modern feminist criticism along with a rethinking of the binary whereby women would gain entry into literature through invalidation or belittling notions of gender identity namely portrayals in literature as far more complex and multifaceted.

Brief Summary of Selected Short Stories

Soaba from *These Hills Called Home* by Temsula Ao unfurls the tragic tale of Imtimoa, mentally disabled orphan, and Imtila, wife of a potentate in a gang involved in criminal activities. Imtimoa, nicknamed Soaba ('idiot' in the Ao language), roams from place to place, gradually being taken in by the townsfolk who grant him food and shelter. Soaba is fascinated by the vehicles of the gang, and he begins to hang around the grounds that belong to Boss, the leader of the gang. Imtila, Boss's wife, takes pity on Soaba, feeds him, cleans him up, dresses him, and sends him to the woodshed to sleep. To her, Soaba's arrival is like a welcome diversion from her lonely life.

The Jungle Major by Temsula Ao revolves around Khatila, peculiar marriage of a beautiful, well-connected woman from a decorated clan and Punaba, a small, dark, and unremarkable man who works as a driver and mechanic. No matter how they don't match in looks and social hierarchy, a couple nevertheless get married, but their life is full of rumors and hearsays about their union in the village that they are living in. The

dynamics change as the land is involved in a fight for independence and Punaba secretly sings up for the underground rebel army, which promotes him to a captain. Although the village is indirectly affected, Khatila remains a loyal wife to her husband despite the increased military presence and the growth of the authorities' watchfulness.

Secret Corridors by Janice Pariat delves into the complex social fabric of a girls' school, such as exclusion, gossip, and belonging. The central character, Natalie, observes and interacts with the girls around her, significantly Iba and Carmel. The story depicts the tacit yet rigid hierarchies that build a social premise behind the interaction of girls, compounded by pressure and judgment. The theme of social exclusion is very important in *Secret Corridors*. Carmel is the newest girl at the school, and the rumors are quickly set afoot, which the other girls develop against her. Parents who are gossiping by the school gates and the teachers joining these discussions provide ample fodder to flesh out Carmel's and her family's image. Carmel finds herself being judged and ostracized in such a way that the ugly ease with which reputations can suffer is illustrated, while the difficulty in changing them hardly needs emphasis.

Janice Pariat's *An Aerial View* tells the tale of the protagonist coming to terms with the aftermath of her husband's many infidelities and consequently subsequently intuitively realizing who she was and to whom she was closely related. The story opens with the protagonist in London contemplating the extramarital affair with a woman named Lily, prompting feelings of betrayal and discomfort: know what rest became of her marriage and where that left her perception of herself. As she grapples with feelings of shame and failure, she seeks answers by tracing her past.

Key Discussion on Gender Identity in the Selected Short Stories

Temsula Ao's *Soaba* delves into the complex relationship between gender and identity in a Naga society undergoing rapid change, characterized by political turmoil and the decline of traditional values. The narrative illustrates how power dynamics shape gender roles, particularly through the character of Boss, whose exaggerated masculinity is linked to his position as a feared enforcer for the government. Boss's power is upheld through violence, intimidation, and the oppression of others, showcasing how masculinity in conflict zones is often built on dominance and control (Das 45). In contrast, his wife, Imtila, represents the limited role of women within this patriarchal framework. Initially portrayed as a passive character, she is trapped in

domesticity and compelled to adjust to her husband's violent way of life, emphasizing the gendered expectations that require women to uphold familial and social harmony, even in oppressive circumstances (Misra 112). The story ultimately critiques the rigid gender binaries that shape power and identity in a society disrupted by conflict.

The character of Soaba, often seen as the town "idiot," challenges conventional ideas of identity by existing outside the established social hierarchies of gender, class, and power. The bond he shares with Imtila, who finds comfort in caring for him, questions the traditional gender roles that limit her. Imtila's nurturing feelings for Soaba act as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing violence of her husband's world, indicating that care and compassion can counter oppressive systems (Baruah 78). However, Soaba's death highlights the vulnerability of such resistance, as it ultimately makes him a victim of the very violence he unintentionally reveals. His identity as an "idiot" represents the innocence and humanity that often suffer in societies ravaged by conflict and power struggles.

The narrative further points out the performative character of identity, especially as it relates in the context of the Naga separatist movement. The Boss's redemption from a tyrant to a pitiful wraith after the death of Soaba highlights the fragility of identities based on power and violence. There is in Imtila's eventual return to her husband, after his transgressions, the complicated ways in which women operate in patriarchal systems, where survival is constantly at odds with moral decisions (Ao 23). Through examining gender and identity, Soaba challenges the damaging effects of conflict on personal and collective identities.

In *The Jungle Major*, gender and identity are really the bases upon which the character's act and the story flows. Khatila, the protagonist of the novel, seemingly represents the archetypal housewife-function, that is supposed to be a typical feminine role. When she saves her husband, Punaba, her quick thinking shows her to be active and able, worthy of being a heroine not only in her normal life but especially at the hour of danger. This opposes the grain of normal gender roles and resonates with Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, where gender is not something natural born, but rather a set of actions and behaviours shaped by society (Butler 1990). Khatila's ability to remain an ideal wife and a clever fighter for the safety of her family amplifies the fluidity of gender identity, the idea that traditional roles are constantly put into question.

Unlike Khatila, Punaba is presented as a non-beautiful working-class man married into a family of higher social standing. Later on, the transformation in his identity—not only as a leader of the rebels but also as a symbolic reconciliation of gender, power, and resistance—is perceivable upon his assuming the role of a revered "Jungle Major" in the secret Army. The rise of Punaba complicates little Khatila's own image of manhood, which was largely based on physical strength and beauty.

This story also further complicates our understanding of gender and identity in a village community, where public perception of who people are stands in stark contrast to who one really is behind closed doors. The villagers display their first signs of disapproval in the marriage of Khatila and Punaba, thus delineating the boundaries of social order concerning status and gender roles. Khatila's marriage to Punaba thus forces society into defiance of its definitions of "a good match." Still, Khatila's gender identity—her beauty, power, and autonomy—is what enables her to rescue the village and her husband as the story develops. Though women's agency is mostly located within subjugating structures, where they may also have moments of radical transformation, this act of defiance underscores their ability to redefine their identities within patriarchal organizations, a concept considered in postcolonial feminist theory (Spivak, 1988). Khatila's deliberate use of her gender identity to defend her family highlights that gender is not only a personal identity but also a strong means of negotiating and questioning society's expectations.

Seen in the context of teenage girl bonds, cultural demands, and the performative quality of femininity in a convent school environment, Janice Pariat's *The Secret Corridor* investigates gender and identity. Iba, for example, personifies the perfect version of femininity—charismatic, beautiful, and socially powerful—whereas Carmel is shunned for her supposed offenses such as her rumored boy relationships and her mother's sordid reputation. Reflecting Judith Butler's idea of gender as a performative act, the contrast highlights how people are continuously evaluated based on their capacity to fit in with society created standards (Gender Trouble 25). The way the girls treat Carmel highlights how even among teens societal standards of female purity and propriety are internalized and then weaponized.

Especially in the setting of Shillong's varied social and ethnic terrain, the narrative also explores the convergence of gender and cultural identity. The casual xenophobia of the girls towards the Marwari and Dkhar students shows how gender identity is connected with ethnic and cultural hierarchies. Doreen's claim

that Marwaris should be "kicked out of the state" shows more general unrest in the area, where social acceptance or exclusion is often determined by ethnic identity (Karlsson 78). Natalie's unease with these comments brings attention on her inner turmoil as she negotiates her own identity as someone who has Assamese friends, a group ostracized within the prevalent Khasi narrative of the school. This tension shows how gender identity is not isolated but rather influenced by crosses of race, class, and cultural membership (Crenshaw 1241).

In the end, the narrative addresses themes of longing and queer identity, primarily manifested through Natalie's shifting rapport with Carmel. In one such empty dorm, the kiss that they share brings forth a space where these girls can let their identities slip out, if only temporally, from the vicious grips of the normative masculine and heterosexual systems operating over their daily lives—a tenet pleasingly mirrored in Adrienne Rich's 'lesbian continuum,' where emotionally intimate and erotic bonds between women may create a sense of 'continuousness' in which lesbianism runs along a continuum a closeness can be drawn off of straightable models (Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence 648). Pariat's account of that moment in such radical circumstances draws attention to those moments when queer identity becomes possible in marginal spaces when faced with an unrelenting system of oppression and exclusion.

In Janice Pariat's *An Aerial View*, a woman is engaged in fighting out her husband's infidelity against the backdrop of betrayal, memory, and identity. Recollects—the illicit affair with Lily, so troublesome to have not only shattered her idea of normalcy at that moment, but a search moment in the very real identity of her marriage. As she learns that her: world and the extraordinary life she had fabricated for herself no longer reconciled, she faced, with the knowledge of humiliation, betrayal, and indescribable grief.

The key player in the stories of her youth on an Assam tea plantation—not far from places such as Margherita—shines in colors, echoes with great sounds, and binds together with closeness, contrasting the life of London. It allows her to escape the terror of life for just a minute, providing some sort of anchorage into the euphoria and chaos of childhood recovery to whom this dollhouse belongs, Ms. Sharma. The dollhouse represents her longing for a real elementary life which makes her jump with wonders at several opportunities. These are memories trying to act as a symbol for the main character in Pariat, trying to heal her emotional

wounds through someone else's and return back to the time when she was able to laugh. Merging the past with the now weaves tightly an idea of return and holding on to precious lost details through memory.

Essentially, *An Aerial View* is about the protagonist's resilient journey as she traverses pathways of memory, identity, and emotional healing that can potentially lead to some form of resolution. Pariat reflects that reconnecting with past occurrences can become the strength to confront what lies ahead and pave a way toward a somewhat authentic tomorrow.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the selected works of Temsula Ao and Janice Pariat give rich insight into the intricate dynamics of gender and identity vis-à-vis Northeast India. The framework for their stories opens up an analysis that, rather than endorsing traditional portrayals of gender roles, puts to scrutiny how identity itself is shaped by social expectation and individual will. Through *The Jungle Major*, Khatila's shattering of traditional feminine roles juxtaposed with Punaba's reconfiguring of masculinity represents character subverting hard gender expectations. Their trajectories indicate that gender is not essential but contextual and individual performance. Equally Janice Pariat's *The Secret Corridor* and *An Aerial View* navigate through the very fabric of gender identities tempted against cultural, ethnic, and personal forces showing that identity is always negotiable and changing.

It was made clear in the selected stories that gender has intersectionality with other identities such as cultural, ethnic, and class ones. Pariat's *The Secret Corridor* shows an example of this intersection in the microcosm of a convent school in which beauty rather than ethnicity serves as a standard measure to judge girls. This is indeed a reflection of the theory of intersectionality as proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, wherein identity agitation occurs not along but through colliding and dependent systems of discrimination. In the same manner, with political and social tumult in Nagaland, Ao's *Soaba* reminds the audience about such tensions in contradictions where the public expectation exceeds constraints of a personal identity. Thus, such challengers of convention as *Soaba* make the power structures gendered more complex, displaying identity as more than just a personal criterion but an arena in which to resist systemic impositions.

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