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(Under CBCS)

ENGLISH
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WRITINGS FROM INDIA'S NORTHEAST



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Unit-1

Literature From The Northeast: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

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1.1 Objectives

In this unit, we will:

- *study* the historical evolution of literature in Northeast India,
- *analyse* the themes and motifs in English literature from North-East India,
- *look up* notable English-language writers and their contributions,
- *understand* the contemporary trends and the critical reception of Northeastern English literature.

1.2 Introduction

Northeast India, often referred to as the “Land of Seven Sisters” along with their “brother” Sikkim, is a region of unparalleled diversity, where each state boasts unique geographical features, rich cultural histories, and evolving literary traditions.

1. Arunachal Pradesh: Nestled in the northeastern extremity of India, Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by its mountainous terrain, dense forests, and swift rivers. Sharing international borders with Bhutan, China, and Myanmar, it is often dubbed the “Orchid State of India” due to its rich floral diversity. The state is a mosaic of indigenous tribes, each with distinct customs, languages, and traditions. Festivals like ‘Losar,’ ‘Solung,’ and ‘Dree’ are integral, reflecting the agrarian lifestyle and animistic beliefs prevalent among its communities.

Arunachal Pradesh’s literary journey is deeply rooted in oral traditions, with folklore, myths, and legends passed down generations. The transition to written literature, especially in English, is relatively recent. Writers like Mamang Dai have been instrumental in this shift. Her works, such as *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), weave indigenous narratives into contemporary prose, offering readers a glimpse into the state’s ethos. She intricately weaves together oral traditions, history, and contemporary realities in her work, capturing the essence of Arunachal Pradesh’s cultural and natural landscape. *The Legends of Pensam* offers a poignant exploration of tribal life, memory, and change in Arunachal Pradesh. Her poetry collection *River Poems* (2004) further emphasizes the deep connection between nature and identity in Arunachal Pradesh’s literary consciousness. She was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017 for *The Black Hill*, a historical novel based on colonial encounters in the region.

2. Assam: The gateway to Northeast India, is renowned for its fertile plains, the majestic Brahmaputra River, and expansive tea gardens. Its topography ranges from valleys to hills, contributing to its rich biodiversity. A melting pot of ethnicities, Assam’s culture is vibrant, with classical dance forms like ‘Sattriya’ and festivals such as ‘Bihu’ celebrating the agricultural calendar. The state is also

known for its traditional crafts, including silk weaving and bamboo artistry.

Assamese literature boasts a rich legacy that dates back to the 9th and 10th centuries, with the composition of the *Charyapadas*, mystical Buddhist verses that are among the earliest examples of Assamese literary expression. These early works laid the foundation for a literary tradition that evolved through various phases, reflecting the socio-cultural transformations of the region. The medieval period witnessed the emergence of *Buranjis*, historical chronicles penned during the Ahom dynasty's reign, which provide invaluable insights into Assam's history and culture. This era also saw the flourishing of devotional literature, with figures like Srimanta Sankardeva pioneering the Bhakti movement in Assam, enriching the literary landscape with his *Borgeets* (lyrical songs) and *Ankiya Naat* (one-act plays). The advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century marked a pivotal shift, introducing Western literary forms and the English language to Assam. During this period, Lakshminath Bezbaroa emerged as a seminal figure, often hailed as the father of modern Assamese literature. His multifaceted contributions encompassed poetry, novels, plays, and essays, which played a crucial role in the standardization and modernization of Assamese prose. Bezbaroa's involvement with the literary journal *Jonaki*, launched in 1889, ushered in the Jonaki era, characterized by romanticism and a renaissance in Assamese literary expression.

In contemporary times, Assamese literature continues to thrive, with authors delving into themes of identity, insurgency, and migration. Writers such as Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) and Homen Borgohain have garnered national acclaim, enriching Indian literature with their profound narratives that reflect the complexities of Assam's socio-political fabric. Their works, alongside those of

emerging authors, ensure that Assam's literary tradition remains dynamic and resonant with the evolving ethos of its people.

3. Manipur: Often termed the "Jewel of India," Manipur is characterized by its lush valleys surrounded by hills. The central feature is the Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India. Manipur's culture is rich, with classical dance forms like 'Manipuri Raas' and martial arts such as 'Thang-Ta'. Festivals like 'Yaoshang' and 'Lai Haraoba' are integral, reflecting the state's syncretic traditions.

Manipur's literary heritage is deeply rooted in its ancient manuscripts, known as "puyas," which encompass a wide array of subjects, including mythology, history, and religious practices. These texts, written in the Meitei script, date back to the 12th century, with the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle, being a notable example.

The transition to English literature in Manipur gained momentum post-independence, providing writers with a platform to articulate the state's socio-political landscape. A prominent figure in this literary evolution is Robin S. Ngangom, born in 1959 in Imphal. A bilingual poet and translator, Ngangom writes in both English and Meiteilon, reflecting the intricate tapestry of Manipuri identity. His poetry collections, such as *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006), delve into themes of personal and collective memory, conflict, and the quest for belonging. Ngangom's work not only enriches Indian English literature but also serves as a poignant commentary on the complexities of life in Northeast India.

4. Meghalaya: Known as the "Abode of Clouds," Meghalaya is famed for its rolling hills, abundant rainfall, and living root bridges. The state's terrain is predominantly hilly, with stretches of valleys

and highland plateaus. Home to major tribes like the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia, Meghalaya's matrilineal society stands out. Festivals such as 'Nongkrem' and 'Wangala' are celebrated with fervour, showcasing traditional music and dance.

Meghalaya's literary heritage is deeply rooted in its oral traditions, with the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes preserving their histories, myths, and cultural values through storytelling, songs, and folklore. The transition to written literature, particularly in English, has gained momentum in recent decades, leading to a vibrant literary scene that intertwines indigenous narratives with contemporary themes. A prominent figure in this literary evolution is Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, born in 1964 in Sohra (Cherrapunjee), Meghalaya. Belonging to the Khasi tribe, Nongkynrih writes poetry, drama, and fiction in both Khasi and English, embodying what he describes as "literary ambidextrousness." His bilingual proficiency allows him to authentically convey the nuances of Khasi culture while engaging with a broader audience.

Nongkynrih's literary repertoire includes several notable works. His poetry collections, such as *The Yearning of Seeds* and *Time's Barter: Haiku and Senryu*, reflect a deep connection to nature and Khasi traditions. In *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends*, he retells traditional Khasi stories, preserving and sharing the rich oral heritage of his community. His recent novel, *Funeral Nights*, has garnered critical acclaim and is set to be published internationally in 2024. Nongkynrih's works exemplify the fusion of indigenous oral traditions with contemporary literary forms, enriching the tapestry of Indian English literature. His writings not only preserve the cultural heritage of Meghalaya but also provide insightful reflections on identity, tradition, and change in a rapidly evolving world.

5. Mizoram: Mizoram, with its undulating hills and valleys, shares borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh. The state's landscape is dotted with rivers and lakes, contributing to its scenic beauty. The Mizos have a rich tapestry of traditions, with festivals like Chapchar Kut and Mim Kut marking agricultural cycles. Their folk songs and dances, such as Cheraw (bamboo dance), are integral to their cultural identity.

Mizoram's literary journey is deeply rooted in its rich oral traditions, where folklore, songs, and narratives play a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting cultural values and histories. The advent of Christianity in the late 19th century marked a significant transition from oral to written literature. In 1894, missionaries J.H. Lorrain and F.W. Savidge developed the Mizo alphabet, facilitating the documentation of the Mizo language. By 1896, the first Mizo language book, *Mizo Zir Tir Bu*, was published, focusing on Christian teachings and moral values.

The early 20th century witnessed the emergence of Mizo journals, such as *Mizo Chanchin Laishuih* in 1898 and *Mizo leh Vai Chanchin* in 1902, which played instrumental role in nurturing Mizo literature. Prominent writers like Liangkhaia contributed significantly during this period, publishing numerous articles and compiling historical accounts that preserved ancient chants and festive songs.

The evolution of English literature in Mizoram is a more recent phenomenon. Mona Zote, born in 1973, stands as a prominent figure in this domain. Residing in Aizawl, she describes herself as a poet “disguised as a government employee.” Her poetry, written in English, has been featured in various journals, including *Indian Literature* and *Carapace*, and in the *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast*. Zote's work offers poignant reflections on identity, cultural transitions, and the complexities of modern Mizo life. Another notable contribution to Mizo English literature is

Zoramiby Malsawmi Jacob, recognized as the first novel from Mizoram written in English. The novel delves into the socio-political landscape of the state, providing readers with an intimate portrayal of Mizo society.

6. Nagaland: Nagaland's hilly terrain is interspersed with valleys and rivers. Mount Saramati stands as its highest peak, and the state is renowned for its rich biodiversity. Comprising 16 major tribes, each with distinct customs, Nagaland is a cultural mosaic. The Hornbill Festival, dubbed the "Festival of Festivals," is a significant event, showcasing the state's rich heritage.

Nagaland's literary heritage is deeply entrenched in its oral traditions, with stories, myths, and songs serving as the primary mediums for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. This oral-centric culture has been the bedrock of Naga identity, encapsulating the ethos, values, and histories of its diverse tribes.

The transition from oral to written literature, particularly in English, marked a significant evolution in Naga literary expression. A seminal figure in this shift is Temsula Ao (1945–2022), an esteemed poet, short story writer, and ethnographer from the Ao Naga tribe, and an alumnus of Department of English, Gauhati University. Her literary journey commenced with poetry, with her debut collection, *Songs that Tell*, published in 1988. This work, followed by subsequent collections like *Songs that Try to Say* (1992) and *Songs of Many Moods* (1995), reflects her deep connection to Naga oral traditions. Ao perceived herself as a "Naga woman-poet in search of tradition," intertwining the lyrical quality of oral songs with written verse. Beyond poetry, Ao ventured into short stories, with notable works such as *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). These narratives delve into the complexities of Naga society, addressing themes of identity,

conflict, and resilience. Her storytelling mirrors the traditional oral narratives, capturing the essence of Naga experiences during tumultuous periods.

The literary landscape of Nagaland continues to flourish, with contemporary writers drawing inspiration from their rich oral heritage while addressing modern themes. This fusion of traditional narratives with contemporary issues ensures that Naga literature remains dynamic, reflecting the evolving identity of its people.

7. Tripura: Tripura, though the third smallest state in India, boasts of diverse landscapes ranging from hills to plains. It shares an extensive border with Bangladesh, influencing its cultural milieu. The state's culture is a blend of tribal and Bengali influences. Festivals like Kharchi Puja and Garia Puja are celebrated with enthusiasm, reflecting the harmonious coexistence of diverse communities.

Tripura's literary landscape is a confluence of its indigenous tribal narratives and Bengali literary traditions. Historically, the state's literature has been enriched by its diverse communities, each contributing unique oral and written traditions. The indigenous Kokborok language, spoken by the Tripuri people, has a rich repository of folklore, poetry, and songs that have been passed down through generations. Notably, poets like Chandrakanta Murasingh have been instrumental in bringing Kokborok literature to the forefront. Murasingh's poetry delves into the contemporary challenges of Tripura, capturing the essence of its socio-political landscape.

The state's literary tradition also boasts significant historical works such as the "Rajmala," a chronicle of Tripura's kings, authored by Kali Prasanna Sen. This seminal work provides invaluable insights into the region's history and cultural evolution. In recent decades,

there has been a discernible shift towards writing in English, with authors exploring themes of identity, migration, and socio-political changes. This transition has been facilitated by bilingual and multilingual writers who adeptly navigate between languages, enriching the state's literary tapestry. The emergence of translation works has further bridged the gap between indigenous narratives and global readerships.

The state's commitment to preserving and promoting its literary heritage is evident through institutions like the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute in Agartala. This institute undertakes fundamental and applied research, documentation of tribal art and culture, and publishes research studies, thereby ensuring the preservation of Tripura's rich literary traditions.

8. Sikkim: Nestled in the Himalayas, Sikkim is characterized by its mountainous terrain, including the majestic Kanchenjunga. The state's diverse ecosystems range from subtropical to alpine climates. Sikkim's populace is a blend of Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali communities, each contributing to its rich cultural tapestry. Festivals like 'Losar,' 'Bumchu,' and 'Dasain' are integral to its cultural identity.

Sikkim's literary tradition has historically been rooted in rich oral narratives, encompassing folklore, myths, and legends passed down through generations. The transition to written literature, particularly in English, is a relatively recent development. One of the pioneering works in this domain is *His Majesty's Paying Guest* by Lal Bahadur Basnett, published in 1980. This novel is notable for being among the first English-language novels from Sikkim, offering readers a glimpse into the state's unique socio-political landscape. Basnett also authored *A Short Political History of Sikkim*, further contributing to the documentation and dissemination of Sikkim's history and culture. In recent years, there has been a burgeoning of

English writing in Sikkim, with emerging authors exploring themes of identity, tradition, and modernity. This literary blossoming reflects a growing interest in articulating the Sikkimese experience within the broader canvas of Indian English literature.

1.3 Historical Evolution of Literature in Northeast India

The literary heritage of Northeast India is a rich tapestry woven from ancient oral traditions and the gradual emergence of written texts. This evolution reflects the region's diverse cultures, languages, and historical contexts. For centuries, the indigenous communities of Northeast India have relied on oral narratives to convey their histories, beliefs, and values. These stories, passed down through generations, serve as repositories of communal knowledge and cultural identity. Folktales, myths, and legends are integral to the social fabric, often performed during festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings. They encompass a wide range of themes, from creation myths and ancestral tales to moral lessons and explanations of natural phenomena.

In Assam, for instance, the Bodo community has a rich tradition of oral literature, including ballads and epics that narrate the exploits of heroes and deities. Similarly, the Khasi and Garo tribes of Meghalaya have preserved their folklore through songs and storytelling, which are central to their cultural practices. These narratives not only entertain but also reinforce social norms and communal values. In Manipur, the Meitei community's folktales, known as “fungawari” or “stories of the kitchen fire,” were traditionally shared in domestic settings, particularly around the hearth. These tales encompass a wide range of themes, from moral lessons to explanations of natural phenomena, and are integral to Meitei cultural heritage. Similarly, the Darlong community of

Tripura has a rich oral tradition that encapsulates their rituals, beliefs, and societal norms. These narratives often feature elements of the supernatural and are closely tied to the community's worldview. The transition to Christianity in the early 20th century led to a decline in these traditional practices, but efforts have been made to document and revive them.

The advent of written literature in Northeast India marked a significant shift in the preservation and dissemination of cultural narratives. This transition was influenced by various factors, including the spread of religious movements, the patronage of local rulers, and increased interactions with neighboring regions.

In Assam, the 14th century witnessed a pivotal moment with the composition of the *Saptakanda Ramayana* by Madhava Kandali. This work is notable for being one of the earliest translations of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* into a modern Indo-Aryan language. Kandali's rendition is distinguished by its emphasis on human emotions and relationships, offering a more accessible version of the epic for the Assamese-speaking populace. His translation not only made the *Ramayana* more relatable but also played a crucial role in the development of Assamese literary language. The *Saptakanda Ramayana* is considered a cornerstone of Assamese literature, reflecting the region's linguistic and cultural revolution. Kandali's rendition is distinguished by its humanized portrayal of characters like Rama and Sita, emphasizing their virtues and flaws. This approach made the epic more relatable to the common people. However, the original *Adikanda* ("first book") and *Uttarakanda* ("last book") were lost over time. These sections were later composed by Madhavdev and Srimanta Sankardeva in the 16th century, ensuring the completeness of the epic. Another significant

work by Kandali is *Devajit*, which extols the virtues of Lord Krishna and reflects the devotional sentiments prevalent in Assamese society during that period. Religious movements have played a significant role in the evolution of literature in Northeast India. In Assam, the Bhakti movement, led by figures like Srimanta Sankardeva, had a profound impact on literary production. Sankardeva's compositions, including *Borgeets* (devotional songs) and *Ankiya Naat* (one-act plays), were instrumental in disseminating religious teachings and fostering a sense of cultural unity. His works, written in Assamese, contributed to the standardization of the language and the enrichment of its literary corpus.

In Manipur, the introduction of the Meitei script (Meitei Mayek) facilitated the recording of oral narratives and religious texts. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle of the kings of Manipur, is a significant historical document that blends myth, history, and legend. This chronicle provides insights into the socio-political and cultural developments of the region, illustrating the integration of oral traditions into written records. In Manipur, the spread of Vaishnavism influenced literary traditions. The translation of religious texts into the Meitei language and the composition of devotional poetry and prose facilitated the integration of new religious ideas into the local cultural framework.

Tripura's literary heritage also reflects a synthesis of indigenous and external influences. The *Rajmala*, a royal chronicle composed in the 15th century, documents the history of the Manikya dynasty. Written in Bengali, the *Rajmala* incorporates local legends and myths, highlighting the interplay between oral traditions and written literature. Additionally, the spread of Vaishnavism led to the

creation of devotional literature in the Kokborok language, further enriching Tripura's literary landscape.

Stop to Consider

Lummer Dai's *Paharar Xile Xile* (1961) is recognized as the first novel by an Arunachali author. Written in Assamese, it delves into the customs and beliefs of the Adi community, marking a significant literary milestone for the state. Padmanath Gohain Baruah's *Bhanumoti* (1890) holds the distinction of being the first Assamese novel. Its publication signaled the advent of modern literary expression in the region. The first printed Manipuri book, *Manipurer Itihas*, emerged in 1890 from the Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta. Though not in English, it laid the groundwork for subsequent literary developments in the state. Early English works include William Pryse's *Introduction to the Khasi Language* (1855) and Hugh Roberts's *Khasi Grammar* (1867). These texts were instrumental in documenting and teaching the Khasi language during the colonial period. Malsawmi Jacob's *Zorami* is acknowledged as the first novel written in English by a Mizo author. The novel offers a poignant exploration of the state's socio-political landscape. Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) stands as the first English novel by a Naga writer. The work captures the complexities of Naga society and its historical narratives. Prajwal Parajuly's *The Gurkha's Daughter* (2012) is among the earliest literary works in English from Sikkim. The collection of short stories delves into the lives of the Nepali-speaking diaspora, reflecting the region's diverse cultural fabric. Radhamohan Thakur's *Kok-Borokma* (1900) was a grammar book for the Kokborok language, marking an early literary effort. Later, *Smai Kwtal*, a translation of the New Testament published in 1976, became a significant literary work among the Tripuri community.

1.4 Emergence of English Language Literature

The emergence of English-language literature in Northeast India is deeply intertwined with the region's colonial past and its post-independence socio-political evolution. This literary trajectory reflects a complex interplay between imposed linguistic structures and indigenous cultural expressions.

Colonial Influence: The Introduction of English Education

British colonial rule in India introduced English education as a strategic tool for administration and control. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Indian Education" advocated for creating a class of intermediaries who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay). This policy led to the establishment of English-language schools and universities, primarily in urban centers.

In Northeast India, the spread of English education was facilitated by Christian missionaries, particularly in the hill regions. These missionaries established schools that not only provided religious instruction but also taught English, thereby introducing the language to indigenous communities. The adoption of English served multiple purposes: it enabled communication with colonial administrators, facilitated access to Western knowledge systems, and provided new avenues for social mobility.

However, the imposition of English also had complex implications. While it offered opportunities for engagement with global discourses, it also marginalized local languages and oral traditions. The prioritization of English in education and administration often led to the erosion of indigenous linguistic practices, creating tensions between colonial modernity and cultural preservation.

Post-Colonial Developments: Articulating Regional Identities

Following India's independence in 1947, English retained its prominence as a language of higher education, governance, and literature. In Northeast India, writers began to use English as a medium to articulate regional identities, socio-political issues, and cultural narratives. This literary expression was not merely a continuation of colonial legacies but a conscious appropriation of the language to voice indigenous experiences.

The post-independence period saw the emergence of English-language literature that grappled with themes such as ethnic identity, political unrest, and cultural hybridity. Authors from the region employed English to narrate stories rooted in local contexts, thereby challenging the homogenizing tendencies of mainstream Indian literature. As Jobeth Ann Warjri notes, "the 1980s marked a period when a sense of what distinguishes the literature in English from the Northeast, as a unique literature, emerges" (Warjri).

This period witnessed the rise of writers who, while educated in English-language institutions, remained deeply connected to their cultural roots. Their works often reflect a dual consciousness, navigating between global literary forms and indigenous worldviews. The use of English enabled these authors to reach wider audiences and participate in national and international literary discourses, while simultaneously preserving and promoting regional narratives. Moreover, English-language literature from Northeast India has played a crucial role in addressing issues of marginalization and representation. By articulating the unique socio-political realities of the region, these literary works have challenged dominant narratives and brought attention to the complexities of identity, belonging, and resistance.

1.5 Themes and Motifs in North-Eastern English Literature

North-Eastern English literature is deeply rooted in the region's unique socio-political and cultural landscapes. Three predominant themes emerge in this body of work: identity and ethnicity, conflict and insurgency, and nature and landscape. These themes are intricately woven into narratives that reflect the complexities of life in North-East India.

- **Identity and Ethnicity:** The exploration of identity and ethnicity is central to North-Eastern English literature. Authors delve into the multifaceted nature of identity, influenced by factors such as ethnicity, culture, and the politics of belonging. The region's diverse ethnic composition and historical experiences of marginalization contribute to a rich tapestry of narratives that question and redefine identity.

In Anjum Hasan's novel *Lunatic in My Head*, the protagonist Aman observes the slogan "We are Khasis by Blood, Indians by Accident," highlighting the tension between ethnic identity and national affiliation (Hasan 32). This sentiment reflects a broader sense of alienation felt by many in the North-East, where ethnic pride often supersedes national identity. Such narratives underscore the complexities of belonging in a region that has historically been on the periphery of the Indian nation-state. The literature also addresses the challenges of preserving cultural identity amidst modernization and external influences. Authors portray characters grappling with the loss of traditional practices and languages, emphasizing the importance of cultural preservation. These stories serve as a means of asserting ethnic identity and resisting cultural homogenization.

- **Conflict and Insurgency:** The theme of conflict and insurgency is prevalent in North-Eastern English literature, reflecting the

region's history of political unrest and violence. Writers depict the impact of insurgency on individuals and communities, exploring the psychological and social ramifications of living in conflict zones.

TemsulaAo's short stories, for instance, offer poignant portrayals of life amidst insurgency in Nagaland. Her narratives delve into the experiences of ordinary people caught in the crossfire, highlighting themes of loss, trauma, and resilience. Similarly, Hannah Lalhlanpuii's novel *When Blackbirds Fly* provides a child's perspective on the 1966 bombing of Aizawl, capturing the innocence lost in times of conflict. These literary works not only document the human cost of insurgency but also critique the socio-political structures that perpetuate violence. By giving voice to marginalized experiences, authors challenge dominant narratives and advocate for peace and reconciliation.

- **Nature and Landscape:** Nature and landscape play a significant role in North-Eastern English literature, often serving as both setting and symbol. The region's lush landscapes are intricately depicted, reflecting the deep connection between people and their environment. Authors use descriptions of nature to convey themes of identity, spirituality, and ecological consciousness.

In poetry and prose, the natural world is portrayed with reverence, highlighting its beauty and significance in cultural practices. For example, the representation of nature in North-Eastern literature often emphasizes the harmony between humans and the environment, as well as the threats posed by ecological degradation. Such narratives serve as a call to preserve the region's biodiversity and traditional ways of life. Furthermore, landscapes are used metaphorically to reflect internal states and societal conditions. The depiction of changing seasons, rivers, and forests often parallels characters' emotional journeys and the transformation of

communities. Through these motifs, authors underscore the interdependence between humans and nature, advocating for a holistic understanding of well-being.

Check Your Progress

1. What role does memory and oral tradition play in shaping the narrative structures of English literary works from North-Eastern India? (100 words)
2. How is the theme of insurgency and its socio-political ramifications explored in the English literature emerging from North-Eastern states? (100 words)
3. In what manner do environmental concerns and the relationship with nature manifest in the English literature of North-Eastern India? (100 words)

1.6 Notable English-Language Writers and Their Contributions

The literary landscape of North-Eastern India is rich and diverse, with several writers contributing significantly to Indian English literature. Here are some notable authors from the region:

1. **Easterine Kire:** Born on March 29, 1959, in Kohima, Nagaland, Kire is an acclaimed poet and novelist. She pursued her education at North-Eastern Hill University and later obtained a doctorate in English literature from Savitribai Phule Pune University. Kire's works predominantly draw from Naga oral traditions and history. Her notable publications include:
 - *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003): The first English novel by a Naga author, it recounts the battle between British forces and a Naga hamlet.

- *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007): This novel explores societal norms and the internal conflicts within Naga society.
 - *When the River Sleeps* (2014): This novel won The Hindu Literary Prize in 2015.
 - **Accolades:** She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2018 for her novel *Son of the Thundercloud* and the Padma Shri in 2007.
2. **Janice Pariat:** Hailing from Jorhat, Assam, Pariat grew up in Shillong, Meghalaya. She completed her BA in English Literature from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and an MA in History of Art from SOAS, University of London. Pariat's writings often intertwine local folklore with contemporary narratives. Her notable works include:
- *Boats on Land* (2012): A collection of short stories that won the Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award and the Crossword Book Award for Fiction in 2013.
 - *Seahorse* (2014): A novel that was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize in 2015.
 - *Everything the Light Touches* (2022): This novel won the Sushila Devi Award for Best Fiction in 2023.
3. **Mamang Dai:** A former civil servant and journalist, Dai is a prominent literary figure from Arunachal Pradesh. Her works reflect the culture, traditions, and landscapes of her home state. Notable publications include:
- *The Legends of Pensam* (2006): A novel that delves into the myths and realities of tribal life in Arunachal Pradesh.
 - *The Black Hill* (2014): This novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017.

- **Accolades:** Dai was honored with the Padma Shri in 2011 for her contributions to literature and education.
4. **Mitra Phukan:** Based in Assam, Phukan is a writer, translator, and columnist. Her works often depict the socio-cultural milieu of Assam. Notable works include:
- *The Collector's Wife* (2005): A novel set against the backdrop of Assam's insurgency.
 - *A Monsoon of Music* (2011): This novel explores the world of Hindustani classical music intertwined with Assamese culture.
5. **Anjum Hasan:** Born and raised in Shillong, Hasan is a contemporary author and poet. Her writings often reflect urban life and existential themes. Notable works include:
- *Lunatic in My Head* (2007): A novel set in Shillong, capturing the aspirations and dilemmas of its characters.
 - *Neti, Neti* (2009): This novel was shortlisted for the Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010.
6. **Temsula Ao:** A distinguished poet, short story writer, and ethnographer, Ao was a professor at North-Eastern Hill University. Her works provide deep insights into Naga life and traditions. Notable publications include:
- *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006): A collection portraying the impact of insurgency on Naga society.
 - *Laburnum for My Head* (2009): This collection won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013.
 - **Accolades:** Ao was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007 for her contributions to literature and education.

7. **Dhruba Hazarika:** An Assamese author and civil servant, Hazarika has significantly contributed to English literature from the region. His notable works include:
- *A Bowstring Winter* (2006): A novel centred around sports and personal redemption.
 - *Sons of Brahma* (2014): This novel delves into the underbelly of Assam's socio-political scenario.
8. **Siddhartha Deb:** Born in Meghalaya and raised in Arunachal Pradesh, Deb is a journalist and author. His works often explore the complexities of modern India. Notable publications include:
- *The Point of Return* (2002): A novel reflecting on the transformations in North-East India.
 - *The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India* (2011): Deb borrowed the title from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*. Its first chapter was pulled from the book as a result of a civil injunction. Deb focuses on New India, a country that walks too fast for its shoes.

1.7 Critical Reception and Contemporary Trends

The conferment of the Jnanpith Award to Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya in 1979 for his Assamese novel *Mrityunjay* marked a seminal moment in Indian literary history. As the first Assamese author to receive this prestigious award, Bhattacharya's work brought national attention to the literary prowess emanating from the North-East. *Mrityunjay* delves into the socio-political upheavals of Assam during the pre-independence era, reflecting the region's complex historical narratives. Subsequently, in 2000, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, also known as Indira Goswami, was honored with the Jnanpith Award, further cementing the region's literary

significance. Her oeuvre, including notable works like *The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Pages Stained With Blood*, addresses pressing social issues and the plight of the marginalized, showcasing the depth and diversity of Assamese literature.

The contemporary literary landscape of the North-East is enriched by a cadre of writers who articulate the region's multifaceted identities and experiences through English prose and poetry. Jahnavi Barua's narratives often explore personal and communal identities, while Arnab Jan Deka's works delve into socio-political themes pertinent to the region. Siddhartha Sarma's writings provide nuanced perspectives on historical and cultural intersections. Poets like Nitoo Das and Nabanita Kanungo infuse their poetry with reflections on identity and belonging. Janice Pariat's prose is noted for its lyrical quality and exploration of memory and place. Mona Zote's poetry captures the rhythms of urban and rural life, and Ankush Saikia's fiction often revolves around crime and its socio-cultural implications. Bijoya Sawian and Uddipana Goswami contribute significantly to the discourse on ethnicity and insurgency, offering critical insights into the region's complexities.

These writers collectively challenge monolithic narratives, presenting the North-East as a tapestry of diverse cultures, languages, and histories. Their works often address themes of identity, ethnicity, and the ramifications of insurgency, providing readers with a profound understanding of the region's socio-political dynamics.

SAQ:

1. How do North-Eastern English literary works contribute to or challenge the broader canon of Indian English literature? (100 words)

-
-
2. In what ways does the literature from North-Eastern India address the complexities of ethnic diversity and inter-community relations within the region? (100 words)
-
-

1.8 Summing Up

In this unit, we have covered English writing in North-East India in detail. In the subsequent units, we will be looking into specific writers from the region by analyzing their work.

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Unit-2

Theatre in The North East: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

1.1 Objectives

1.2 Introduction

1.3 History of Indian Theatre

1.3.1 The Earliest forms of Indian Theatre: Classical Sanskrit Theatre

1.3.2 Characteristics of Classical Sanskrit Theatre

1.3.3 Folk Theatre in India

1.4 Modern Indian Theatre

1.4.1 Features of Modern Indian Theatre

1.4.2 Famous Playwrights of Modern Indian Theatre

1.5 Theatre in North East

1.5.1 Assamese Mobile Theatre

1.5.2 Folk Theatre in North East

1.5.3 “Under the Sal Tree Theatre” Tradition

1.6 Summing Up

1.7 Model Questions

1.8 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

The unit attempts to make you familiar with the rich traditions of Indian Theatre and its diverse forms. By the end of this unit, you will be able to-

- *understand* the background of Indian theatre,
- *explore* the diverse forms and features of Indian Theatre with reference to NE,
- *be* familiar with some of the best Indian theatrical performances.

1.2 Introduction

Bharat Muni's *Natya Shastra* is recognized as the foundational and sacred scripture of Indian Theatre. The date of composition of this book dates back to the time between 2000 BCE and 4th century CE. Indian Theatre is a conglomeration of diverse elements of arts such as literature, mime, music, dance, painting, architecture and sculpture. The meaning of *Natya* refers to all these artistic expressions. The present unit is about the history of Indian Theatre in the North Eastern context.

1.3 History of Indian Theatre

Indian theatrical conventions feature textual, sculptural and dramatic effects with mixture of different art forms such as dance, drama, poetry, mime and music. The exact timing of the origin of Indian Theatre is not known but it is believed to be from the 15th century BC since the days of Rigveda. Bharata Muni's *A Treatise on Theatre (Natyasastra)* is considered as the major source of the earliest forms of Indian Theatre, the Sanskrit Theatre. From Classical Sanskrit Theatre to Indian Mobile Theatre, Indian Theatre has travelled a long way.

1.3.1 The Earliest forms of Indian Theatre: Classical Sanskrit Theatre

Classical Sanskrit Theatre was represented by Playwrights such as Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti.

The Buddhist playwright Asvaghosa, who composed the *Buddhacarita*, is known as a pioneering figure in Sanskrit Theatre. Kalidasa, a major figure in the history of Indian Classical Theatrical forms, wrote several plays. They include the

Mālavikāgnimitram (Mālavikā and Agnimitra), Vikramōrvaśīyam (Pertaining to Vikrama and Urvashi), and Abhijñānaśākuntalam (The Recognition of Shakuntala). Another great Indian dramatist was Bhavabhuti (c. 7th century CE) who wrote Malati-Madhava, Mahaviracharita and Uttararamacarita. Two other important dramatists are Shudraka and Bhasa. Mricchakatika (The Little Clay Cart) by Shudraka is known as one of the earliest known Sanskrit plays in India.

1.3.2 Characteristics of Classical Sanskrit Theatre

There are different types of Sanskrit Theatre or dramas as per Bharata Muni which includes *Rupakas* including *Nataka*, *prakarana* and *prahasana*. In India Kutiyattam, practised in Kerala is one of the oldest forms of Sanskrit Theatre. This is a great synthesis of Sanskrit classicism and local theatrical conventions of Kerala. The actors focus on stylized performance, codified theatrical language, eye expressions and *hasta Abhinaya* (Mudras). This theatrical form was traditionally performed in Kuttampalams.

Classical Sanskrit Theatre tradition marked the following features:

- Performed on sacred grounds with an aim to enter and educate.
- Characters include the *Nayaka* (hero), *Nayika* (Heroine), *Vidusaka* (Clown in Shakespearean drama). Humour and comic elements are introduced by Vidusaka or jester.
- *Rasa* (emotional sentiments) and their corresponding *Bhava* are two important elements of Classical Sanskrit Theatre.
- Use of highly stylized acting with focus on *Mudras* (gestures) and *Abhinaya* (facial expressions).
- Music and Dance are integral part of Classical Sanskrit Theatre.

- Elaborate costumes and stage designs with use of curtain (drawn aside) and green rooms.
- Happy and positive ending: The end of classical drama gives a sense of release from tragedy and death.
- Dialogues interspersed with verses such as *cchandās* or other metrical forms.
- Begins with a prologue called *Purvaranga* and ends with a happy note. Incorporates historical, mythological and legendary narrative contents.

SAQ:

1. What are the ancient forms of Indian Theatre? Mention the features of classical Sanskrit Theatre.

.....

2. Discuss how Indian classical Sanskrit Theatre differed from Western Proscenium style of theatre.

.....

1.3.3 Folk Theatre in India

Sanskrit drama and Theatrical tradition came to a decline due to many factors. Some factors are-

- ❖ Rise of Modern Theatre as popular forms of entertainment.
- ❖ Restrictions in *Natyasastra* limited creative freedom
- ❖ Political factors: Shift in artistic preference and change in patronages, rise of regional languages.
- ❖ Barriers in use of Sanskrit language. Sanskrit was a classical language not understood by common people of Assam. As such it became less accessible for audience.

After this decline of the classical form, Folk theatre developed in various regional languages in India from 14th century onwards till the 19th century. Some of the classical trends were retained in folk theatre. Stock characters of Sanskrit Theatre, opening prayer song (benediction), *Sutradhara* (the narrator), the *Vidushaka* were still seen in folk theatre. Folk theatre is a skillful mixture of dance, drama and music, mask and chorus. Among popular folk theatre include the *Nautanki*, *Ramlila* and *Raslila* of North India, the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, *Bhavai* of Gujrat, *Terukkuttu* of Tamilnadu, *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, Jatra of Bengal and *Ankia Naat* of Assam.

Ankia Naat Tradition:

In Assamese culture, Ankia Bhaona is a characteristic Sanskrit theatrical form which is a blend of classical and folk forms. Ankia Naat tradition was associated with the Vaishnava movement in Assam. Ankia Naat refers to one -act play written by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples. The Ankia performance is marked by music, dance and use of mask with the active role of the Sutradhara. Ankia Nat carries the rich classical culture of the Sankari tradition. *Chihna Yatra* is known as the first Ankia Naat composed by Srimanta Sankardeva where Sankardeva artistically drew the world of *Sapta Vaikuntha* to preach Vaishnavism. Through stylised costumes, music and dance drama Sankardeva explained the significance of Vaisnava culture. The language used in Ankia Naat was Brajavali. Characteristic features of Ankia Naat include – role of *Sutradhara*, use of songs and *Bhatima*, dance and drama, use of Brajavali language and Masks. The Brajavali language shares similarities with the language of Vrindavan. Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhav deva used this language to compose their Ankia Naats. Names of a few Ankia Naats written by Sri Sankardeva include

Kaliya Damana, Keli Gopala, Rukmini Harana, Parijat Haran and Ram Vijaya.

Stop to Consider

The Mask Culture in Assam

The mask tradition in Assam is five-hundred-year-old which carry the region's rich classical heritage. Srimanta Sankardeva, was the pioneer behind the emergence and growth of mask culture in the fifteenth century. Sankardeva first introduced the mask tradition in his theatrical performances called *ankiya naats* also known as bhaona. The *sattras* (Vaishnavite monasteries) were the places where such performances were conducted and the Sattras played a vital role in promoting this craft of masks. The mask known in Assamese as *Mukha*

embody mythological characters and they bring lives to characters on stage. Masks are made of bamboo, cane, clay, jute fiber, using cow dung and cloth. The masks are colourfully painted. There are different types of masks such as face masks 'Mukh mukha', "Bor Mukha" etc.

Majuli, the river island in Assam is known for its mask making culture. There the Sattras have preserved and promoted the culture.

In Assam, *Ojapali* is a traditional folk-dance drama performed in groups.

SAQ:

1. Briefly describe about *Ankia Naat* as a Folk theatrical convention. Mention it's characteristic features.

.....
.....

2. Do you see any difference between ancient Sanskrit Theatre tradition and Folk theatre tradition? Write in support of your answer.

.....
.....

In North India the Puppeteers (*Putliwalas*) are quite famous. They are from Rajasthan and skilled in operating marionettes. The *Tholu bommalata* (the dance of leather dolls) in Andhra Pradesh are one example of such puppet plays. They deal with Kings, queens, bandits performing in front of miniature stage.

In Northern India, Bhand Pather (A traditional theatrical form in Kashmir where dance, music and acting is accompanied by *Surnai*, *Nagara* and *Dhol*. Kariyala, in Himachal Pradesh is an open-air folk theatre that addresses social issues satirically. In Southern part of India, the *Dashavatar* in Konkan and Goa area, *Krishnattan* and *Mudiyettu* in Kerala are popular folk theatrical forms.

1.4 Modern Indian Theatre

In the recent past, many significant research works have been done on Indian Theatre. They include Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence* (2005), Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006), Minoti Chatterjee's *Theatre beyond the Threshold: Nationalism and the Bengali Stage* (2004), Nandi Bhatia's *Acts of Authority/ Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (2004).

Earlier Jacob Scrampickal's *Voice to the Voiceless: The Power of People's Theatre in India* (1994), Rustam Bharucha's *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* (1983) were remarkable contributions. Nandi Bhatia, a famous critic on theatre, states that the expanding avenue of criticism concerning Indian theatre is

significant for many reasons. First, it indicates a growing interest towards the history of theatre and calls for a need to work more on the diverse fields in performance studies. Secondly, it puts emphasis on the political side of theatre which has received lesser attention as compared to the aesthetic dimensions of theatre, which carry the potential to question and contest the authoritarian structures.

Since the 19th century onwards, Theatre has been an integral part of social and political movements through anti- colonial plays that were scrutinized by the Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. Nandi Bhatia writes,

It was an important forum for progressive writers and political activists in the early twentieth century in many regions and has helped raise concerns in post- colonial India through institutions such as The National School of Drama (NSD) as well as through the fringe movements in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s onwards. (Bhatia, xiii)

Themes of Modern theatre included a wide range of subjects such as politics of the British Raj in India, Workers' rights, the 1947 Partition, psychological fragmentation, Questions concerning women, Dalit issues etc. enacted through various experimental ways such as folk theatre, mythological dramas, historical revivals and transformed versions of Euro-American Plays (Shakespearean and Brechtian plays). In India, the modern theatre came into existence after colonial contact. The Western and European theatrical conventions began to influence local conventions. Indian theatre was thus influenced by two waves: one by the Western and European theatrical conventions and Sanskrit theatrical conventions. The Sanskrit influence was due to the growth of a post-colonial nationalist aesthetic with a sense of both modernity and Indianness. Nandi Bhatia further explains,

The notion of modernity played out into multiple spheres of theatrical life, including venues of performance, theatre architecture, patronage, space, lighting, proscenium stages, the commercialization of theatre through the sale of tickets, and even the shift from the actor- manager role to that of Director. (Bhatia, xvi)

Modern Indian Theatre is identified with Western Proscenium style of theatre which came to influence Indian traditional theatrical conventions after the colonial contact. From the mid nineteenth century, Indian Theatre enthusiasts started staging plays on Western Proscenium style in Calcutta, Bombay, North and South India. The folk theatrical conventions began to merge with the new waves of Western Proscenium style and moved towards a new theatrical dimension. This also paved the way for commercial theatre. In 1765 a man of Russian origin called Levdev gave way to Modern Theatre by establishing Bengali theatre. The commercial enterprise of Indian Theatre was promoted by companies such as Parsi Theatrical Companies.

1.4.1 Features of Modern Indian Theatre

Modern Indian Theatre was distinct from its Classical and Folk theatre tradition. As it has been deeply influenced by the Western Proscenium style of theatre, it has experienced significant changes I. Presentation, structures and art of narration. The following are some of the salient features of Modern Indian Theatre.

- Experimental nature of theatrical conventions
- Assimilation of classical and folk traditions
- Thematic evolutions: from ancient mythological themes to social and political themes. The assimilation of classical and folk theatrical conventions extended the scope and dimensions

of modern Indian Theatre. One noticeable point is that modern Indian Theatre shifted towards Western dramatic tradition with the inclusion of tragic ending.

1.4.2 Famous Playwrights of Modern Indian Theatre:

The famous Playwrights of modern Indian Theatre include Girish Karnad is an Indian playwright, director and actor from Kannada who blended mythological with the contemporary themes. Notable works include *Hayavadana* (1971), *Tughlaq* (1964), *The Fire and the Rain* (1994).

Mahesh Dattani was the first Indian Playwright to receive a Sahitya Akademi Award whose literary works combined the theatrical conventions with realism. Dattani's notable plays include *Dance like a Man* (1989), *On Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Final Solutions* (1993).

Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, Habib Tanvir. Others include Utpal Dutt, Bhisham Sahni, Kiran Nagarkar.

In North East India, modern Indian Theatre was popularized by Playwrights such as Assamese playwright Jyotiprasad Agarwala who is known as the father of Assamese cinema and modern theatre. Among others are Arun Sarma, Ratanlal Goswami, Satyendra Nath Sarma, Mahendra Barthakur, Rohini Kumar Baruah.

The Baan Stage or Baan Theatre is the first modern theatre in Assam which was established in Tezpur in 1906. This stage paved the way for the theatre luminaries in Assam such as Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha and Phani Sarma.

1.5 Theatre in North East

Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh in his article “A Theatrical Collage of North East” writes,

“If the traditional and ritualistic dance forms are brought under the umbrella term of theatre then each village in the region has its own distinctive form of theatre.”

Singh refers to different ritualistic dance forms such as harvest dance, seed- sowing dance, war dance etc as folk dances part of theatrical performances. Not only that famous Oja Pali and Ankiya Naat in Assam, Yak Chaam and Enchey Chaam mask dance of Sikkim, Ponung dance, Si-donyi dance of Arunachal Pradesh, Wangala dance, Nongkrem dance of Meghalaya, War dance and Seed- Sowing dance of Nagaland, Lai- haraoba dance of Manipur, Bamboo Dance of Mizoram are examples of rich folk theatrical culture of the North East.

1.5.1 Assamese Mobile Theatre

In North East India, Assamese Mobile Theatre or “Bhramyaman Natak” has been widely known. Prominent mobile theatre groups in Assam include Kohinoor, folk theatre such as Under the Sal Tree traditions.

Pioneers included Achyut Lahkar, who is widely known as the Father of Mobile Theatre in Assam. This form of theatre is different from street plays. The mobile theatre groups change venues and tents and they travel from one place to another carrying their team of cast, musicians, dancers and other performers with their tents. Natyacharya Brajanath Sarma first founded the first mobile theatre group in Assam in 1930. known as the Kohinoor Opera. The first play was staged in 1963 in Pathsala. Under the grand initiative of

Achyut Lahkar's group, Mobile Theatre had its place in Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. In terms of themes and content, Mobile Theatre deals with diverse subjects. From mythological stories to Contemporary family and dance drama, Mobile theatre has travelled a long way. They have staged Shakespeares's masterpieces, Greek classics, Hollywood Blockbusters to adaptations of popular Assamese novels. As for record, there are almost thirty mobile theatre groups in Assam and most are based in Pathsala in Barpeta district (now Bajali District)

The main play of the theatre performance is often preceded by an act of Dance Drama called Nritya Natika which is a dance-based performance. During the performance the artists only mime and dialogues are recited from the background.

1.5.2 Folk Theatre in North East

In India, folk theatre has a rich tradition of its own. They include *Nautanki* dance form of Uttar Pradesh, *Saang* in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, *Raasleela* in Mathura, Vrindavan, *Bhavai* in Rajasthan and Gujrat, *Jaatra* in Bengal, *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Krishnattam* in Kerala, *Dashavatar* from Goa and *Bhand Pather* in Kashmir.

Assam has a rich tapestry of folk culture and literature. Folk theatre is one among them. Folk theatrical performances include Ojapali, Kamrupia Dhulia, Puppetry, Dhulia and Khulia Bhaona, Bharigan, Kushangan, Dotaragan, Palagan etc. Certain semi folk drama forms such as Nagaranam, Mohoho, Kali Chandi dance are very popular.

The traditional String Puppet theatre is quite popular in Assam and in North East India. The Puppeteers enact the plays on *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* by adding dialogues and music. *Putala Nach* is also known as *Putala Bhaona*.

In Sikkimese culture in North East India, there are three ethnic communities (Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalis) with their unique music and folk-dance forms which are performed during various occasions such as during harvest season, songs performed for good luck and prosperity. To name a few Nepali Dances “Maruni”, Tamang Selo”. “Tashi Sabdi” is a group dance performed by the Bhutias. Zo-Mal-Lok is a famous folk dance of the Lapcha community performed during sowing, reaping and harvesting of paddy. There is other popular dance forms of this community called Chu- Faat, Tendong Lho Rum Faat. The Bhutias perform Ta- Shi- Yang- Ku, Yak Chham, Kagyed , Denong- Neh- Nah dances on various other occasions.

Theatre in Manipur: Shumang Kumhei or Shumang Leela (Courtyard Play)

This is a well-known Meitei traditional theatre form, existing in Manipur since the 1850s. mostly performed in Manipur which was prevalent since the monarchical rule in Manipur with an objective to address moral values, promote brotherhood and friendship, The theatre takes place in open air from four sides. The actors are exclusively female or exclusively male. Notable artists include Shougrakpam Hemanta, Chinglen Thiyam, Iboyaima Khuman, Gokul Athokpam and others.

In the area of Manipuri Theatre, Kalakhetra Manipur group comes to the forefront which was established in 1969 by Heisnam Kanhailal as Founder. Their attempts were for the renewal of their ancestral tradition. They organized workshops, training programmes etc for this. Major plays include TamnaLai (Haunting Spirit), Migi Sharang (Human Cage), Lajja, Drupadi etc.

The Mizo Theatre ‘Lem Chan’

The history of Mizo theatre dates back to the story telling traditions. With the introduction of colonial culture and education, the Mizos have witnessed great changes. The history of Mizoram is closely related to the cultural and historical background of the state.

“Len Chan” is a traditional form of Mizo drama and it has its roots in the colonial period. The word ‘lem’ means an image and ‘chan’ means to play. It was first played in 1912. Lem Chan is a touring theatre genre like Mobile theatre in Assam but mostly played on religious or festive occasions.

It is important to mention here that the Zawlbuk played a vital role in the functioning of Mizo folk society. It is an important Mizo cultural centre.

Stop to Consider

Zawlbuk: Zawlbuk is actually a bachelor’s dormitory (compared to Indian Ashram) where the Mizo youths used to have their training in ‘tribal welfare wrestling, hunting and village government’. It is a centre for education, skill development and works as a community hub.

Chheihlam folk dance performances originated after 1900 which are performed along with Chheih hla songs.

Mizoram is known also for the Kushan Gaan, a folk, open air drama performed by the Rajbongshi community characterised by sing, dance, narrative drawing themes from the epics such as the Ramayana.

In Nagaland, the folk-dance forms such as Chang Lo, Rangma, Aaluyattu, Melo Phita are expressions of its theatrical culture. Chang Lo is a traditional folk dance of the Chang tribe in Nagaland performed to commemorate victory in war. Other dance forms have their own significance and cultural context.

1 5.3 “Under the Sal Tree Theatre” Tradition

The "Under the Sal Tree," is an open-air theatre festival at Rampur in Assam's Goalpara district, situated about 100km west of Guwahati, organized since 2010.

The festival was started by Sukrachariya Rabha, a prominent playwright from Assam. Rabha had founded a rural cultural organization called the Badungduppa Kalakendra, in 1998. Rabha organized the festival as a carbon neutral festival to promote the concept of ecology. A theatre where the spectators sit on straws strewn on the floor on bamboo benches and the artists perform on an earthen stage covered with bamboo barricades under sal trees.

Dr. Asha Kuthari Choudhuri, a former Director of the Centre for Performing Arts and Culture, Gauhati University writes,

“As a community that recognizes the imminent destruction of its natural ethos, Badungduppa Kalakendra tries to sustain both its environment and its art, each through the other.”

Dr. Choudhury explains that Sukracharya Rabha who founded the theatre commune, successfully structured a resistance model against the commercial rubber plantations that damage and degrade the fertility of the soil on the one hand and the rapid urbanization that threatens the folklore and performance tenor on the other.

1.6 Summing Up

Indian theatrical conventions have travelled a long way from Classical Sanskrit tradition to the Postmodern theatrical conventions. To understand the theatrical journey of the Northeast, we need to explore the greater history of development of Indian theatrical conventions. The colonial contact was a pathbreaking event for Indian theatrical conventions since it brought with it and altogether different versions of theatre.

1.7 Model Questions

1. Discuss the history of development of Indian theatrical tradition since the classical Sanskrit Theatre.
2. What were the factors that contributed to the decline of traditional theatrical conventions?
3. Who are the forerunners of Modern Indian Theatre? Discuss the characteristics of Modern Indian Theatre.
4. Write briefly about North Eastern Theatre with emphasis on theatre in Mizoram and Manipur.

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Unit-3

Maheswar Neog: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Brief Biography: Dr. Maheswar Neog
 - 3.3.1 Birth and Education
 - 3.3.2 Career and Professional life
 - 3.3.3 Literary Contributions
- 3.4 Critical Appraisal
- 3.5 Dr. Maheswar Neog and his Influences
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 Model Questions
- 3.8 References and Suggested Books

3.1 Objectives

The name that appears at the forefront in the twentieth century history of Assamese culture and literature is Dr. Maheswar Neog. One of the greatest scholars of Sankardeva, Dr. Neog was a renowned cultural historian, Literary critic and academician. The present unit will enable you to

- *be* familiar with Dr. Maheswar Neog's life, career and literary contributions,
- *understand* the scope of his writings and their influence,
- *contextualize* the prescribed text.

3.2 Introduction

In the making of the history of development of Assamese society and culture Dr. Maheswar Neog is often remembered and revered

with gratitude . His entire life has been dedicated to the upliftment of Assamese culture and society. He was not only an eminent Sankardeva Scholar but also an educational activist who played an active role in strengthening the base of higher education in Assam. The present unit is about the life and contributions of one of the best scholars of Assam, Dr. Maheswar Neog whose pathbreaking contributions have heralded a dawn in Assamese culture and society.

3.3 Brief Biography: Dr. Maheswar Neog

Dr. Neog was a versatile genius with wide and extensive knowledge on all disciplines of Indian studies such as History, language, lexicography, orthography, epigraphy, ethnography, historiography, fine arts , painting, dance and drama, folklore together of which Dr. Neog called ‘Assamology’.

3.3.1 Birth and Education

Born on 7 September, 1915 at Kamaedaphiya Village, Sibsagar.

He went to 113 no. Kamardaphiya Lower Primary School and then to Sibsagar, North Lakhimpur and Jorhat High Schools.

In 1934. he successfully completed his matriculation with Star mark and distinctions in four subjects. In 1936, he passed his I.S.C examination securing first division. In 1939, he passed the BA examination with Honours in English from Cotton college and in 1947, he successfully completed Masters with First Class First Position in Modern Indian Language (Major in Assamese). The Gauhati University awarded D.Phil degree in 1955 for his research work titled “ Sankardeva and His Times: Being a study in the History of the Spread of Neo- Vaisnavism in Assam.

3.3.2 Career and Professional life:

Before his career in Gauhati University, Dr. Neog was engaged with school education as a teacher. He was among those notable persons under whose leadership, the University was established in Guwahati. From 1945 to 1948, he was appointed as a Secretary and Superintendent of the University Trust. He was a lecturer in the Department of Assamese from 1948 and was in charge of the preservation of the ancient books at the Gauhati University from 1954 to 1959. From 1958 to 1967, he was in charge of the publication department. There he was engaged in the work of translation of the Mahabharata. In 1954, he became the Co conductor at the literary workshop organised under the Central Educational Ministry in Shantiniketan. He was promoted to the post of Reader at the University in 1954. He was the Head at the Department of Bangla at its PG level in 1964. From 1974 to 1978 he was the Dean of Faculty of Arts. He also became a professor at Patiyala in Punjab University.

In 1966 Dr. Neog was the President at the Akhil Bhartiya Prasya Vidya Sanmilian, Aligarh University.

In 1974, he was the President at the Assam Sahitya Sabha Sanmilian held in Mangaldoi. Dr. Neog had lifetime membership in the BharaoBhasha Samiti, Sahitya Akademi, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Bharatiya Jnanpith and Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO.

From 1960 to 1965, he was the Chief Editor at the Assam Sahitya Sabha. In 1994, he was the vice president at the Srimanta Shankardev Kalakhetra Samaj.

Awards and Recognition:

- ❖ Padma Shri Award in 1974 for his contribution to eduyand literature.

- ❖ The title “ Sadashya Mohiyan” (Great Member) by Assam Sahitya Sabha.
- ❖ Sri Manta Shankardev Award in 1989
- ❖ Selected as ‘ Emeritus Professor’ of the Gauhati University.
- ❖ Received Fellowship at the National Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1995.

SAQ:

1. Write Briefly about the life and career of Dr. Maheswar Neog.

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2. Dr Maheswar Neog write about almost all disciplines of culture and society. Briefly write about his literary contributions to Assamese culture and society.

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3.3.3 Literary Contributions

Dr. Maheswar Neog’s immense contributions to Assamese literature and history has enriched the treasure of Assam. He was not only a scholar of Sri Sankardev and his Vaisnava Culture, but also a devotee of Assamese music ,dance and drama. The following are some of his remarkable works in Assamese literature and history.

1. *Pavitra Assam (The Sacred Book)* Ed. in 1960

This book is a remarkable collection of information about the religious and historical sites of Assam. This includes a descriptive account of the holy places of Assam, namely, Hindu temples and shrines, tirthas and devasthanas, neo- Vaishnava sattras, Sikh Gurudvaras, Jain temples, Buddhist viharas, Islamite mosques and

dargahs, Christian churches and places of tribal worship. Dr. Maheswa Neog compiled and published the views and observations of different writers in the book *Pavitra Axom* which was published in 1960.

2. *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Guwahati University

Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankardeva and His Times, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1965

3. *Sankardeva*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1968

4. *Religions of the North East*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1984

5. *Assam's Dharmar Buranji: Aandhar and Puhor* (Chandrakanta Borpujari Memorial Lecture). Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1988

6. *Sri Sri Sankardev*, 1948

7. *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan*, Sahitya Akademi, 1982

8. *Nidhi Levi Farewell*, Sahitya Akademi, 1985

9. *Sankardeva and His Predecessors*, 1953.

10. *Asomiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, 1962

11. *Asomiya Geeti Sahitya*, 1958

12. *Assamese Drama and Theatre*, 1971

13. *Sattriya Dances*, 1973

14. *The Art of Painting in Assam*, 1960

His book *The Art of Painting in Assam* explores the history and development of painting in Assam, including manuscript painting, folk art. The book incorporates the long history of painting in Assam since pre-historic times till the rule of the Ahoms.

The rich variety of writings represent Dr. Maheswar Neog as a true devotee of culture and literature. Not only that he wrote poetry such as *Raktakamal* (1943), *Under the Sky* (1970), *Laajvanti* (1994) and *Mushafirkhana* (1974). He worked as editors of *The Cottonian*,

Vol. XV, 1936-37 as student editor, *Jayanti* (Raghunath Choudhury) in 1938-39, *Ramdheni* and *Jhankar*

His prose pieces were published in the Journal of Asiatic Society, Calcutta, Journal of Oriental Research. Madras, Journal of Music Academy. Madras, Indian Historical Quarterly, Calcutta, Journal of the University of Gauhati and many others.

Dr. Neog was actively involved with Chandrakanta Abhidhaan in 1962 and 1988 publications. He was also an editor of Adhunik Asomiya Abhidhaan, 1977.

3.4 Critical Appraisal

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan called Dr. Maheswar Neog as ‘the last generation of the renaissance in this age of specialization’ (Neog, 2011, vii).

Pranavswarup Neog wrote in behalf of Professor Maheswar Neog MemoyTrust stated that Professor Maheswar Neog had stood like a colossus in the world of academic, literary and cultural studies of Assam with his holistic vision. (Neog, 2011, vii).

Dr. Neog was among those who struggled for the establishment of a University in Assam. His untiring efforts with Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa, Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed, Gopinath Bardoloi led to the formation of the Gauhati University Trust Board.

Celebrating his immense contributions, many other renowned writers have written about Dr. Maheswar Neog. They include Dr. Mukunda Madhava Sharma and Dr. Satyanarayana Ratha, Bhaba Prasad Chaliha, Nagen Choudhury, Dr. Malini and Dr. Nagen Saikia.

According to Nabakanta Baruah,

In Assam, in undivided Assam, of the first University, Dr. Maheswar Neog was among the first three Doctorates. (Saikia, 419)

He was a true successor of Dr. Banikanta Kakati.

Besides all these luminaries, critics and educationists such as Suniti Kumar Chatterjee , Bishwanarayan Shastri, Mukunda Madhav Sarma have paid rich tribute to Dr. Neog through verse.

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was overwhelmed by the research work of Dr. Neog on Sankardeva's life and contributions and his thorough observations on socio-cultural background of that period. He praised his work as 'encyclopaedic', elaborate with grasp over the fundamental questions on the subject, and also thorough in terms of treatment of subject matter. This is how he expressed his experience of reading Neog,

I am filled with admiration at the comprehensiveness of this study by Professor Neog. Herein, in one compact volume we have almost all that we should know about the Hindu culture of Assam Association it expressed itself, through Vaisnavism and the Ekasarian faith, which may be described as Assam's expression of the mediaeval pan-India Bhakti movement. (Saikia, 8)

He said that the book had opened up a new horizon in mediaeval Hindu religion and culture. Noted writer and critic, Sailen Bharali praised Dr. Neog as a rare genius and he was the maker of history of Assamese literature. In comparison with writers such as Dimbeswar Neog and Satyendra nath Sarma, Maheswar Neog enjoyed a special position for his perspectives and interpretations were unique and unconventional. According to Sailen Bharali, Dr. Maheswar Neog was concerned about two things- To do research on Culture and society in the Sankari period and to do editing of the rare ancient books. (Saikia, 11). Thus we see that Dr. Neog was

dedicated towards his research work on Sri Sankardeva and his times and worked as editors of some of the major literary and cultural works.

SAQ:

1. Discuss briefly about Dr. Maheswar Neog's contribution to Sankari literature and culture.

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2. Discuss briefly about Dr. Maheswar Neog 's contributions to art and painting

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.....

3.5 Dr. Maheswar Neog and his Influences

Famous Assamese writer Jatindranath Borgohain called him a saint in the making of Assam's regional culture. Dr. Neog took great efforts in uplifting and promoting Assamese language, culture and literature through an analytical approach and through research and illustration. In the making of Assamese culture and society, Dr. Neog has significantly contributed as literary scholar and expert. (Saikia, 429).

Dhirendra Nath Chakraborty, a famous writer from Assam writes that Dr. Neog has contributed to all the sectors of Assamese society as a rare personality and a preacher. He gave a new dimension to Vaishnavite literature through his research and literary analysis and strengthened the Sankari Literature in Assam.

Besides, he enriched the Sattriya culture and Assamese music through his scholarly writings and criticisms. Chakraborty also praised Dr. Neog for playing pivotal role in the establishment of Gauhati University.

It is often said that style is the man. Kamaleshwar Sarma in praise of Dr. Neog's writing styles states that he followed his own unique literary style greatly inspired by Dr. Banikanta Kakati.

Radhika Mohan Bhagavati writes about Dr. Neog that

It was his patriotism and deep regards for his society that served as inspiration for all his works.(Saikia, 425)

Nilima Dutta writes that Dr. Neog's scope of writing went beyond the regional sentiments and exhibited universalism in terms of thoughts and ideas. (Saikia, 422)

Noted writer Dr. Bhabendranath Saikia said that he was greatly inspired by the scholarship and influence of Dr. Neog and he was almost unparalleled in his field of work.(Saikia , 422)

Renowned Scholar and writer Dr. Mahendra Bora in his book *The Evolution of Assamese Script* has acknowledged the contribution of Dr. Neog's *Prachya Sasanavali* and praised.

At the very outset, I must not fail mentioning the fact that, in preparing these lectures I have drawn very heavily from the epigraphic materials furnished by Dr. Maheswar Neog in his monumental work, *Prachya Sasanavali*. But for these materials being available to us in such a readymade form, it would have been impossible for us to make the study complete.(Saikia, 22)

Stop to Consider

Prachya Sasanavali by Dr. Maheswar Neog:

The book is a remarkable collection of historical information concerning the ancient rock inscriptions in Assam. They include the Kanai – Barasi- bowa rock inscriptions, Chandrabharati's rock inscriptions in North Guwahati, Rock inscriptions of Nilachala Kamakhya temple, Rock inscriptions of Hayagriva- Madhava

temple, inscriptions of Pandunatha – Hari temple, rock inscriptions of Umananda temple, inscriptions related to victory of Namjani Barphukan , Inscriptions of the Kamatesvari temple, Kamatapur. It also includes information regarding the stone inscriptions and copper inscriptions found in different places in Assam. The book is a rare collection of Assam’s historical assets.

Satish Chandra Bhattacharya in his article “ Lipitatva Gaweshak Adhyapak Maheswar Neog” writes that Dr. Maheswar Neog began his work as a researcher in epigraphy in 1957 and during his research for D.Phil degree from 1851 to 1954, he collected the Copper plates of ancient Assam. Two of his famous write ups on epigraphy are “The Assamese Bengali Script” and “ Origin and Development of Eastern Indian Scripts”

3.6 Summing Up

Dr. Maheswar Neog’s ingenuity in literature, great endeavour to contribute to Assamese history and culture make him one of the most revered personalities and luminaries of Assam. The present unit gave an overview of his role as a famous Assamese literary icon and educationist. In the development of education and culture in Assam, in the construction of a composite Assamese society, Dr. Maheswar Neog’s pathbreaking contribution has been remarkable.

3.7 Model Questions

1. Discuss briefly about Dr. Maheswar Neog ‘s contributions to Assamese culture and society.

2. Discuss briefly about Dr Maheswar Neog 's observations on the development of higher education in Assam. What role did he play as an educationist?
3. Write briefly about the subject matters of Dr. Neog's *Prachya Sasanavali* and *Pavitra Assam*.

3.8 References and Suggested Books

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Unit-4

Maheswar Neog: Romance of a University

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Maheswar Neog: A Brief Biography
 - 4.3.1 The Great Assamese Scholar and his Contributions
- 4.4 Maheswar Neog: A Dreamer of Higher Education in Assam
 - 4.4.1 Maheswar Neog and Gauhati University
 - 4.4.2 Reading the Text: The Romance of a University
- 4.5 Pranavswarup Neog's account on Dr. Maheswar Neog's role in Gauhati University
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 Model Questions
- 4.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

Dr. Maheswar Neog was a great scholar, visionary and a great son of India. In the development and promotion of Assamese Culture Dr. Neog brought Renaissance to Assamese culture and literature. In the establishment of Gauhati University and development of higher education in Assam, Dr. Neog's active role and contributions will always be remembered and revered. In this unit you will be informed about Dr. Maheswar Neog's famous work "The Romance of a university" published in 1974 where Dr. Neog has elaborately described the journey and growth of the establishment of the University. By the end of the unit you will be able to

- *understand* the history behind the establishment of the University in Assam,

- *learn* about Dr. Neog's contributions in the development of higher education in Assam,
- *be* familiar with his literary contributions.

4.2 Introduction

Dr. Maheswar Neog is known for his excellence in language, literature, art, philosophy, music and anthropology. One of the most revered writers of Assam, Dr. Neog represented the Nava Vaishnava tradition with great devotion and commitment. His immense contribution to Assamese history and literature and dedication towards preservation of Assamese culture, literature and identity has been a source of great inspiration for researchers for years. We look upto Dr. Maheswar Neog's write ups to learn about the rich assets of Assam's vibrant cultures.

4.3 Maheswar Neog: A Brief Biography

Born on 7th September, 1915, in Shivsagar, Kamardophia village. His father was Manik Chandra Neog and mother, Chandraprabha Devi. His mother used to sing devotional songs and Maheswar Neog as a child listened to those songs with great interest. His mother also narrated the tales of Ramayana and Mahabharata and he listened to all those wonderful , exciting tales.

As a student , Maheshwar Neog was a bright one and he successfully completed his school education from Kamardophia Lower Primary School. He passed his matriculation examination with letter marks in four subjects. He topped in Assamese subject from Gauhati University and passed his Masters from Calcutta University in Assamese. Later He was awarded the Doctorate

Degree for his thesis on " Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam".

In 1948, he became the lecturer in the PG Dept of Assamese in Gauhati University and in 1956 he became the Reader. In 1954 Dr.Neog was appointed Deputy Director of the Literary Workshop at Santiniketan, under the Government of India. From 1966 to 1978, he served as Jawaharlal Nehru Professor at Gauhati University. Further, from 1978 to 1984 , Dr. Neog held the position of Sankardev Professor at Punjabi University in Patiala.

He was the Dean, Faculty of Arts in Gauhati University from 1974 to 1977. Dr. Maheswar Neog also bags the credit for introducing Assam's Satriya dance to the national stage. Significantly, in 1958, Dr. Neog introduced the dance at the Sangeet Natak Akademi seminar at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. This was for the first time Satriya dance was introduced as Indian Dance form along with famous classical Indian dance forms such as Bharat Natyam and Kathak. On 13 September, 1995, the devotee of Assamese culture and literature breathed his last. His rich legacy of historical and cultural knowledge, great endeavour for cultural revival, exceptional knowledge in academics have been an inspiration for years.

4.3.1 The Great Assamese Scholar and His Contributions

In 1974 he was honored with the Padma Shri by the Government of India for his contribution to literature and education. In the same year he served as President of Assam Sahitya Sabha. He was the President at the All India Oriental Conference (23rd session) and Fine Arts Department of Aligarh Muslim University.

He was associated with the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award Selection Board, and Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO.

Besides, he was a member of Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti and visited East European countries as part of his lecture tour.

Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam was a landmark study in Assamese religious and cultural history. Another remarkable contribution is *Prachya Sasanavali* which is an in-depth exploration of epigraphy in Eastern India over 600 years.

He started writing at a young age and composed his first poem when he was in Class III. He contributed to scholarly articles as a graduate. He wrote an article on Assamese marriage songs which was published in *The Indian Review* (1939). His works on Assamese history and culture received wide acceptance and renowned scholars such as Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Prof. Sushin Kumar De, Prof. D.C. Sirkar, and Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray greatly acknowledged his literary vision and excellent intellectual calibre.

4.4 Maheswar Neog: A Dreamer of Higher Education in Assam

Dr. Maheswar Neog was a great visionary and an enthusiast who dedicated his whole life to his passion for writing. A section of his Presidential Address to the Annual Meeting of Gauhati University Teacher's Association (9 August, 1969) has been cited below to make you understand his great endeavour for promotion of education and culture in Assam.

" But we have always ' miles and miles to go'. There is the question of having a hygienically and artistically beautiful University campus. Some one may long to have an architect of the University endowed with a highly artistic bent of mind before we can see this end achieved. Only recently a Bombay artist friend of mine living in New Delhi observed that Jalukbari was the best part of Gauhati; but

then the next moment it has to be added that this was because we are still half in the lap of nature. We have to exercise our thought how municipal activities may have healthier and more aesthetic directions through a Committee already in existence. " (Neog, 2009, 474)

" There has been always much talk of research and investigation and all that. I do not, however, know if our act has so far been equal to our talk in this. If it has not, there might alybe reasons behind it; for we cannot act in vacuum. The human materials that offer themselves to the guides and facilities and the scope for the exercise of our investigating capacity have often such limits as would assume discouraging proportions." (Neog, 2009, 474)

In the following lines Dr. Neog encouraged his fellow teachers to work every thing with care and caution.

" Newer and heavier responsibilities for teachers are coming slowly in to view with newer ideas of education. Our University has adopted the policy of higher education through regional medium. This may very well lead to only confusion unless and until we take every step with utmost care; and if we donot prepare ourselves for the great risk ahead, future generations are sure to catch us napping. That would be disastrous and unhappy predicament." (Neog, 2009, 474)

In the three segments of his speech you saw him as a great visionary, a cautious leader and as a dreamer. The reading of the essay" The Romance of a University" will enable you to understand Dr. Neog in a deeper way.

SAQ

1. Discuss the role of Dr. Maheswar Neog in the development of higher education in Assam.

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2. Discuss briefly about the man and personality of Dr Maheswar Neog.
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4.4.1 Maheswar Neog and Gauhati University

Dr. Maheswar Neog's great endeavour was applauded by Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed. In 1956 when he received his Doctorate degree, he was introduced by Ahmed in the following way,

I am very proud to introduce Dr. Neog. It is by his own efforts, pains and perseverance that he has built his life. I have known him since he was a student. I remember with feeling how when I was Secretary of Gauhati University Trust Board he helped me and the great Gopinath Bardoloi in the building of the University he is now serving. He then served in a humble capacity. But through his own endeavours he now serve the University in a much higher role.(Saikia, 295).

Dr. Neog played an active role in the constitution of the University. There was an instance when he was asked to send his interpretation of the University Emblem by the University Grants commission in 1968. In his reply Dr. Neog wrote as follows,

“The emblem is very simple. The lion capital at the bottom connects it with a symbol which stands for India and her intellectual and spiritual attainment, attached to the motto, culled from the Samhitopanishad . The lotus buds along the base and the multipetalled lotus round the centre symbolize

beauty, light, purity and bliss that education is to bring, while the lamp being in the form of a trident stands for the light of learning. The wavy line surrounding the unfolding central lotus is indicative of the rhythm of music associated with literature and arts, spoken of the physical sciences, the cadence of Eternity and the pulsation of universal ether.”(Saikia, 296)

Pranavswarup Neog in his article “ Gauhati University and Maheswar Neog “ mentioned out this interpretation by Dr. Neog.

Paying a rich tribute to Dr. Neog, Dr. Rohini Kumar Mahanta expressed,

“ ...The scientific and objective temper so conspicuous in his writings dissuaded him from encroaching upon homiletics so characteristic of many critics ancient and modern with himself at the center he created a hive of academic pursuits under the roof of the Gauhati University exploring the cloisters and hearths for the surviving north-eastern treatise, retrieving texts from the rock inscriptions and copper plates. It was almost preordained that Professor Neog should be shouldering the onerous responsibility of steering the University in the desired and expected course.” (Saikia, 316)

4.4.2 Reading the Text: The Romance of a University

The text is divided into two segments. The first one is about the journey of Higher Education in Assam and its slow pace of development. The second part is about the thought and planning of a University in Assam. In the text Dr. Neog has critiqued the

indolence and indifference shown towards the history of development of higher education in Assam since its inception. He expressed his great disappointment at the lack of a higher educational institution in the state even after years of British Rule in India. The progress of elementary and secondary education was much slower in Assam. However, he states that the establishment of the first High school , ' Gowhatty High School' in 1835 within the first eight years of British Rule in India was an optimistic move by the Company Government. Dr. Neog acknowledged the contribution of Mr.Scott, an Agent of the Company in establishing a few Bengali Vernacular schools for the native people. This is how the process of development of higher education began in Assam at a very slow pace. The second high school was started in the late 1841. The role of local people was immense in the establishment of high school in Assam. On people's demand First Arts classes were started in Gowhatty High School in 1866. In addition to that two law classes were opened in 1875. However, these college sections were closed down as it was thought that satisfactory college education in Guwahati is not feasible. Hence after that they thought it better to send the higher education scholars to Calcutta with monetary benefits. Therefore more students and scholars began to travel to Calcutta to pursue their career. The old demand for a locally based college increased as it became difficult for the scholars to go to Calcutta for college education. Here you have come to know that Assam did not have its own college campus for the development of higher education. Calcutta became the destination of most scholars in Assam. In the next part you will come to know about those preachers of higher education under whose bold initiatives Assam had its first higher institution.

Birth of the First College institution in Guwahati:

Noted educationist Manik Chandra Barua played a major initiative in this call for higher institutions in Assam. Barua submitted a petition in 1899 to the Government urging for the establishment of a college in Guwahati and also added that unless it is done, the number and amount of stipends must be suitably increased. His concern was mainly over establishment of a new college in Guwahati. Fortunately, Sir Henry Cotton was the Chief Commissioner of the province who took interest in the demand and responded with kindness. Eventually the college was named after that good Commissioner Sir Henry Cotton. Even though the institution could not cope properly but later it developed. Instead of old F.A. intermediate Arts classes were introduced and B.A., B.Sc., pass course and Honours course were there in 1914. M.A. classes in English also started functioning. This is how the college grew into a full fledged college.

The First Step Towards an Independent University:

The establishment of Sir Henry Cotton 's Cotton College, in fact paved the way for an independent University in Guwahati, Assam. Sir Michael Sadler who had been appointed Commissioner at the Calcutta University by the Government of India in 1917. Sir Sadler was also the Chairman of the London University Commission. These members of the Commission were much delighted to see the natural campus of Cotton College and its academic strength. They greatly applauded the inner working of the college and expressed hope that the place Guwahati has the potential to have its own site for an independent University.

Dr. Neog has mentioned that Guwahati was a place of interest for the Commissioners because it was the heart of real Assam.

Guwahati is better connected by waterways, railways and has close connections with the Khasi Hills. Dr. Neog stated that except Burma, among the Calcutta University College, no college except Cotton College had a clearly defined geographical unit and the scope to study linguistic, literary, historical, archeological, economic, geological fields. The Commission members Sir Michael Sadler, Sir Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Ziauddin and others opined clearly that Guwahati aspires to be the site for a university. The Commission felt that Guwahati would not be able to take a national stand if it continued to be controlled by the Calcutta -run examination. The idea of an independent University received mixed responses from different people. Finally in 1917, the matter was hotly debated and discussed in the April session of Assam Legislative Council. In the December session of Assam Association, there was a demand for a separate university for Assam. At that time Gopinath Bardoloi was a Secretary of the body of Assam Association. Dr. Neog writes that this was among the major public causes. The Association constantly demanded for the site of a university and published brochures on this matter. However, there were so many obstacles on the path. Cotton College went under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Government as a result of Sadler Commission's report. Against such a situation, the Assam Chief Commissioner Sir Beatson Bell, the D.P.I Cunningham and the Officiating Principal of Cotton College, D.E.Roberts presented the matter in strong words but there were none to voice in the Calcutta University. Even though some opined that time was not ripe for a university, D. E. Roberts insisted on the matter. The matter however did not receive much attention.

The matter was however hotly debated in the Assam Legislative Council and in 1934, one member from the Sunamganj constituency, Munawar Ali prepared the draft of a university and

sought permission to introduce the bill in the Council. The bill received mixed responses. The Brahmaputra valley and hill districts gave positive response while the Surma valley negated. Later Ali's proposal was rejected due to financial difficulties. In the meantime, the Assamese Students' Welfare League was formed in the city with Jiwanram Phukan as the secretary and claimed for a separate Assam University. Significantly in 1939, 'One-pice University fund' was raised by Gauhati Students' Federation and Inspector of Schools, S. C Goswami from Assam Valley circle. In the same year, Sir Saadullah formed his ministry and he declared in the 1940 Budget session of the Assembly that the process has been initiated and for that Dr. S K. Bhuyan was appointed as special University officer. In 1941, the Education Minister of that time, Rohini Kumar Choudhury introduced the Assam University Bill.

In 1944, Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa convened an informal meeting with a few Assamese people living in or coming from Calcutta about the university matters. They took resolutions that¹. The university should be named Gauhati University 2) that there would be a registered Gauhati University Trust Board with seven members to deal with financial matters of the university. 3) that there would be appointed a team of paid officers for fund collections. 4) that the Editor of the monthly magazine Banhi, Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa would do publicity for the move. In 1944, there was a public meeting at Sibsagar with Benudhar Rajkhowa as the chairman. There Gopinath Bardoloi was elected as the President and S.C Goswami as Secretary of the University Trust. They also decided to have a University Convention ' with two representatives from the Assam Valley and Hill districts. As a result of their great initiatives, Gauhati University had its first Convention at Guwahati on 29 and 30 December, 1944 where Gopinath Bardoloi was in the Chair. However, after the sudden demise of S. C.Goswami, Fakharuddin

Ali Ahmed was appointed Secretary of the Board. The other members of the Trust were Krishnakanta Handiqui, Heramba Prasad Barua, Sailendra prasad Barua, Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua, Rohini Kanta Choudhury and Faiznur Ali.

In the next part of the chapter, Dr. Maheswar Neog has discussed the actions and initiatives taken by Gauhati University Trust Board. He also stated that Gopinath Bardoloi was deeply impressed by the minutes prepared by him for the convention and he was invited to join as Office Secretary and Accountant. After that different types of appeals were made to people for fund collections for the university Trust. Gopinath Bardoloi took initiatives to invite people for the national cause and a positive response followed everywhere. However, after the arrival of the British Cabinet Mission in Assam, the university movement was affected.

Dr. Neog's role as Office Superintendent:

Dr. Neog carried the Trust Board to Shillong where there was a room at the Government Secretariat. He had to frequently visit Guwahati to contact with the collection committee members. He also came to enquire about acquisition plan of University which was prepared by the Requisition officer of the Govt, Jaminikanta Chakravarti. In 1945, a site of 2, 333 bighas of land was selected by G.N Bardoloi, R Choudhury and others on behalf of the Trust on both sides of the Guwahati-Palasbari road. The places include Uttar Jalukbari, Maj Jalukbari, Sadilapur, Kachari Gari and Dehan Gari Villages. The site was quite beautiful with greenery but the plan was opposed by some people in possession of the land. G. N. Bardoloi asked the Revenue Minister Bishnuram Medhi and Trust Secretary Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed to explain the people about the importance of a university for the young generation and that their land would be substituted. Dr. Neog also met the objection by sending copies of the letter from Sir Ivor Jennings, Vice Chancellor who supported in

favour of the university land acquisition. In 1946, the Second Convention of Gauhati University was held at J.B. College, Jorhat where it was decided to relaunch the campaign for Fund collection. However, there was less enthusiasm for this as Madhav Chandra Bezbaroa fell seriously ill and was sent to Madras for treatment.

In 1947, 21 February, the University Trust Board decided to prepare the draft for the University, prepare estimates for the construction of the University building. F A. Ahmed, G.N. Bardoloi had a discussion with the Educational Adviser, Sir John Sargent and the Education Minister. Dr. Neog and his Trust Board Members collected the calendars and University Acts from different Universities of India and bought and borrowed books from Calcutta the Imperial Library. The people were informed through newspapers that the university would bring educational opportunities to students and educationists of Assam and abroad as there were greater scopes in Assam to study languages, history, archeology, science, agriculture and geology. It was hoped that the university would be able to coordinate education in Assam in residential pattern in a meaningful way. The University Bill was introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1947 by the Prime Minister and Education Minister, Gopinath Bardoloi and it started functioning from 1st January, 1948 with the approval of the bill by the Governor of Assam. However, as per the Gauhati University Act, the Trust Board was dissolved and the all properties and rights were transferred to the University. Gopinath Bardoloi in the first meeting of the University Court at Cotton College recounted the history of establishment of the university and sent a request to Professor Krishnakanta Handiqui to perform the responsibility as the first Vice-Chancellor of the University. Professor Handiqui accepted the

responsibility and joined accordingly. Dr. Neog writes that Gopinath Bardoloi was an optimistic who was hopeful about the newly established University. In the book *The Romance of a university*, Dr. Maheswar Neog has narrated the historical development of higher education in Assam such as, the demand for the establishment of Assam University, the subjects to be taught in the university, establishment of law college under university education, technological institutions on Civil, Mechanical, Electrical, Automobile engineering, a teaching college, a women 's college and board of coaches to prepare students for various competitive examinations. Thus the book incorporated all the issues concerning the administration and composition of the University.

SAQ

1. Discuss how the idea of the University came to a concrete shape in Assam. Who were the forerunners of the establishment of the University in Assam?

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2. What kind of obstacles came in the establishment of a University in Assam? Discuss briefly in the light of the “ *The Romance of a University*”.

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4.5 Pranavswarup Neog's account on Dr. Maheswar Neog's role in Gauhati University

Pranavswarup Neog, son of Dr. Maheswar Neog in his article " Gauhati University and Maheswar Neog" wrote about his father's

contribution to the State's higher education. Here in this segment you will learn about what his son expressed about his father's contribution. The first demand of a university in Assam was made by the British or the Bengali Intellectuals in Assam. As it has been mentioned earlier the first enunciation of a university for Assam was sounded in 1917 when the Calcutta University Commission came to Assam to inspect Cotton College. The matter was addressed in the Assam Legislative Council in the same year. Under the active participation of Munwar Ali, member from the Sunamganj constituency who prepared the draft of a university bill sought permission to introduce the bill in the Council as a private member's bill. There was a row over it. The development after that has been mentioned in the previous section. Later in 1944 on 2nd July, there was a Tea Table gathering in Calcutta under the initiative of Madhab Chandra Bezbaruah where people took oath to establish a university and decided that the university will be named " Gauhati University". In the same year, the meeting of Assam Sahitya Sabha was held in Shivsagar under the presidentship of Benudhar Rajkhoa. There it was decided that there would be a convocation in Gauhati where preparation for the establishment of the university would be made. The convocation was held in Kamrup Academic in Guwahati and there in the meeting it was confirmed that the university would be established in Guwahati only. As Pranavswarup Neog has mentioned, his father joined the convocation as a representative from Shivsagar and Dr. Neog prepared the minutes of the meeting. Gopinath Bardoloi was so impressed by the minutes prepared by Dr. Neog that he requested Laksminath Bezbaroa to involve Dr. Neog in the activities of the forum. Dr. Neog accepted the responsibility with great gratitude. For this Dr. Neog had to resign his job at a high school in Sibsagar. In 1945, on 6th January, the forum of Gauhati University was opened at Kamrup Academy where Neog was

endowed a major responsibility as an Office Secretary and Accountant. It is important to mention here that Pranavswarup Neog compiled and edited the accounts of Dr. Maheswar Neog in the book *The Romance of a University* which was published in 2009 by Nirmala- Maheswar Neog Publication.

4.6 Summing Up

Dr. Maheswar is not only a great name in Assamese Literature but also a social institution. His immense literary contributions to Assamese Scholarships did response to the plethora of questions concerning Assamese language, culture and literature. For any research in the domain of Assamese culture and literature we have look back to the renowned writers belonging to the Assamese Renaissance period. Dr. Maheswar Neog was one among those noble luminaries in Assam. The Romance of a University is an important narrative on the growth and development of Assam's Higher Education System. He was indeed a great dreamer of a new Assam in the post- Sankardeva era in Assam.

4.8 Model Questions

1. Discuss the life and literary contributions of Dr. Maheswar Neog towards Assamese literature and language.
2. What was the romance of the University according to Dr. Maheswar Neog. Discuss in the light of the article “ The Romance of a University “.
3. Who were the pioneers behind the formation of the Gauhati University? How was the University Trust Board formed?
4. Discuss the role of Dr. Maheswar Neog in the establishment of the University in Assam.

4.7 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit-5

Ratan Thiyam: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch
- 5.4 Ratan Thiyam's Career in Theatre
- 5.5 The Theatre of Ratan Thiyam
- 5.6 Summing Up
- 5.7 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *learn* about the biography of Ratan Thiyam,
- *gather* some understanding of his career in theatre,
- *identify* the features of Thiyam's Theatre,
- *appreciate* Thiyam's place in the world of theatre.

5.2 Introduction

Ratan Thiyam, a renowned Indian theatre director, playwright, and cultural icon, has made significant contributions to the Indian theatre landscape. Born on January 20, 1948, in Manipur, India, he hails from a family of esteemed Manipuri dance artists, which nurtured his artistic inclinations from an early age. He received training in Manipuri dance, painting, and Hindustani classical music. In May 2013, Assam University, Silchar, conferred upon him a D.Litt. (Doctor of Literature) degree.

Since the 1970s, Thiyam has been a leading force in the Theatre of Roots movement in Indian theatre. Unlike many Indian theatre

directors, his journey in theatre began with a casual fascination for drama through reading plays, which eventually led to his formal training at the National School of Drama (NSD). He later became the Director of NSD and, most notably, founded the Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal. His global stature as a theatre personality places him on par with figures like Peter Brook and Tadashi Suzuki.

This unit introduces Ratan Thiyam's theatre, offering insights into his artistic vision and contributions. It also prepares you for the reading of his play *Nine Hills One Valley* in the next unit.

5.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch

Thiyam's artistic journey began as a painter, but he soon transitioned to theatre. Thiyam's formal education in theatre began at the National School of Drama (NSD), New Delhi, where he graduated in 1974. This foundational training laid the groundwork for his future endeavours as a theatre practitioner. Thiyam's most notable works for the stage include *Chakravyuha* (The Wheel of War, 1984), *Uttar Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude, 1996), *Urubhangam* (Broken Thigh), and *Blind Age* (Andha Yug, 1953). These productions have garnered widespread critical acclaim and have solidified Thiyam's reputation as a visionary theatre practitioner. Thiyam seamlessly blends ancient Indian theatre traditions with contemporary themes. It was also observed that Thiyam incorporates elements like *Thang-Ta*, a Manipuri martial art form, and *Nata Sankirtana*, a folk-dance form, into his compositions. In 1976, Thiyam founded the Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal, Manipur, which has since become a premier regional and national centre for contemporary theatre. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to Indian theatre, Thiyam was appointed chairperson

of the National School of Drama (NSD) by the President of India in 2013, a position he held for four years. This appointment underscored Thiyam's stature as a leading figure in Indian theatre and his commitment to nurturing the next generation of theatre practitioners. Thiyam's literary talents extend beyond theatre, as evidenced by his publication of a novel at the age of 22, demonstrating his versatility as a creative artist.

Ratan Thiyam has been at the forefront of using theatre as a medium for social commentary and change. Born and raised in Manipur, a state plagued by chronic violence and insurgency, Thiyam's work is deeply informed by the region's tumultuous history. Thiyam's plays, such as *Chakravyuha* (1984), *Aurush* (1987), and *Kangla Nongpok Tori* (1991), collectively known as the *Manipur Trilogy*, offer a powerful critique of the violence and insurgency that became endemic in his state. Through his work, Thiyam seeks to raise consciousness and spread awareness about the devastating consequences of war and violence on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. He often portrayed characters struggling to survive in a war-torn landscape. Thiyam's theatre practice is characterised by its use of powerful imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to convey the horrors of war and the resilience of the human spirit. As a theatre practitioner, Thiyam's commitment to use the theatrical art as a means of social commentary and change serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of theatre.

Ratan Thiyam was also a key figure in promoting the Theatre of Roots. The Theatre of Roots was a pioneering movement that emerged in the 1970s as a conscious effort to create a distinctive body of work that combined modern European theatre practices with traditional Indian performances. The movement was spearheaded by visionary directors like Habib Tanvir, B. V. Karanth, Bansi Kaul, and Vijay Tendulkar, who sought to challenge the dominant colonial

ideology and aesthetics that shaped Indian theatre. Thiyam's involvement with the Theatre of Roots was not merely a creative endeavour but also a deeply personal and cultural one. For Ratan Thiyam, the movement served as a means of reconnecting with his cultural heritage and challenging the dominant cultural heritage imposed by colonialism. The Theatre of Roots offered him the opportunity to explore the traditional Manipuri folktales, myths, and legends, thereby creating a unique theatrical language that was both rooted in tradition and modern in its sensibilities. Thiyam's work within the Theatre of Roots was characterised by its innovative use of traditional performance practices, such as Manipuri dance and music, combined with modern European theatre techniques. His plays such as *Chakravyuha* and *Aurush* features complex dramaturgical structures as well as a deep engagement with the cultural and mythological heritage of Manipur.

Ratan Thiyam's numerous awards and honours are a testament to his significant contributions to Indian theatre. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1989 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 2012, the highest honour in the performing arts conferred by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. In 2013, he was conferred the Bhupen Hazarika Foundation Award by the Sarhad Foundation, a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting cultural exchange and understanding between India and other countries. Thiyam's other notable awards and honours include the Bharat Muni Samman (2011), the John D. Rockefeller Award (2008), and the Kalidas Samman (2005). He was also recognized as the International Man of the Year in the field of Theatre and Humanism in 1998-1999. His innovative approach to theatre, his ability to engage international audiences, and his efforts to promote cultural exchange and understanding have all been recognized through these awards.

Thiyam's commitment to social justice and cultural activism has been evident throughout his career. In 2001, he returned his Padma Shri award to the Government of India in protest against the centre's announcement of an extension of Manipur's ceasefire with the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland. This bold gesture underscored Thiyam's dedication to advocating for the rights and interests of his community.

Ratan Thiyam is a distinguished figure in Indian and world theatre, celebrated for his innovative theatrical approaches, his commitment to social justice and cultural activism, and his enduring impact on the Indian theatre landscape. His contributions to Indian theatre are a testament to his dedication, passion, and commitment to the art form. Throughout his career, Ratan Thiyam has remained committed to his artistic vision, which emphasizes the importance of roots and tradition in contemporary Indian theatre. His contributions have not only enriched the Indian theatre landscape but have also inspired a new generation of theatre practitioners. Thiyam's legacy continues to inspire and influence new generations of theatre practitioners, solidifying his position as one of the most important and influential theatre practitioners of our time.

Check Your Progress

What is Theatre of Roots? (60 words)

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What is the theme of the plays by Thiyam, known as the Manipur Trilogy? (80 words)

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5.4 Ratan Thiyam's Career in Theatre

Ratan Thiyam was a distinguished Indian playwright and theatre director, who has revolutionized the Indian theatre landscape with his innovative approaches. His theatrical oeuvre spans over four decades and comprises a diverse range of plays that showcase his mastery of theatrical craft and his deep understanding of the human condition. Thiyam was closely associated with the Theatre of Roots movement which has led to a unique combination of traditional Manipuri performance practices and the innovative use of modern European theatre techniques that resulted in a body of work that continues to inspire and influence Indian theatre to this day. His work, within the Theatre of Roots movement, represents a significant intervention in Indian theatre which sought to challenge dominant cultural narratives and create a distinctive theatrical language.

Throughout his illustrious career, Thiyam has held various prestigious positions. He served as the chairperson of the National School of Drama (NSD) from 2013 to 2017, and as the vice-chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Additionally, he was the director of the NSD from 1987 to 1989. Thiyam's tenure as director

of National School of Drama (NSD) from 1987 to 1988 was marked by significant contributions to the institution. During his time at NSD, Thiyam worked tirelessly to promote Indian theatre and provide a platform for emerging theatre practitioners. In 1976, Thiyam founded the Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal, Manipur, a theatre group that has played a crucial role in promoting the “theatre of roots” movement in India. This movement, which emphasizes the importance of traditional Indian theatre forms and techniques, has been instrumental in shaping Thiyam’s artistic vision and approach to theatre.

One of the most notable aspects of Thiyam’s career is his participation in the Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM), the annual theatre festival of NSD. Thiyam’s productions have been a regular feature at the BRM, and his work has been showcased at several editions of the festival. In 1999, Thiyam’s production of Ajneya’s *Uttar Priyadarshi* in Meitei was staged at the 1st BRM. This production was significant not only because it marked Thiyam’s debut at the BRM but also because it highlighted the importance of traditional Indian theatre forms and techniques. Thiyam’s subsequent productions at the BRM, including his presentation of Kalidasa’s epic poem *Ritusamharam* in 2002 and his *Manipur Trilogy* in 2008, have been equally notable. The *Manipur Trilogy*, which was performed at the 10th BRM, marked the golden jubilee of NSD and was a testament to Thiyam’s contribution to Indian theatre. The *Manipur Trilogy* is considered a seminal work in Indian Theatre, showcasing Thiyam’s mastery of story-telling, symbolism, and dramatic structure. The trilogy constituting the three plays, *Chakravyuha* (1984), *Aurush* (1987), and *Kangla Nongpok Tori* (1991), explores themes of identity, culture, and the human condition, set against the backdrop of Manipur’s rich history and mythology. In 2010, Thiyam’s production of *When We Dead Awaken*

was featured at the 12th BRM. This production was significant not only because it showcased Thiyam's mastery of theatre technique but also because it highlighted the importance of exploring new themes and ideas in Indian theatre.

Thiyam's early work, *Karanabharam* (1979), is an adaptation of Sanskrit playwright Bhasa's *Karna-bhara: Karna's burden*. This play marked the beginning of Thiyam's exploration of classical Indian themes and motifs in his work. *Imphal Imphal* (1982) and *Chakravyuha* (1984) further demonstrated Thiyam's ability to craft complex narratives that explored the human condition. Thiyam's adaptation of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, titled *Lengshonnei* (1986), showcased his ability to reinterpret classical Western plays in an Indian context. This play was followed by *Uttar Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude, 1996), an adaptation of Hindi playwright Agyeya's work. This play explored themes of redemption and personal struggle, demonstrating Thiyam's continued interest in exploring the human condition through his work. Thiyam's subsequent plays, including *Chinglon Mapan Tampak Ama* (Nine Hills One Valley) and *Ritusamharam* (based on Kalidasa's Sanskrit play), further demonstrated his mastery of theatrical craft and his deep understanding of Indian culture and tradition. Other significant compositions by Thiyam include *Andha Yug* (The Blind Age, based on Dharamvir Bharati's Hindi play), *Wahoudok* (Prologue), *Ashibagee Eshei* (based on Henrik Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, 2008) and *Lairembigee Eshei* (Song of the Nymphs). *The King of Dark Chamber* (2012), based on Rabindranath Tagore's play *Raja* (1910), marked a significant milestone in Thiyam's career, showcasing his continued ability to reinterpret classical Indian plays in a contemporary context.

Thiyam's outstanding contributions to Indian theatre have been recognized with numerous awards and honours. He received the

Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in Direction in 1987 along with the Fringe Firsts Award from the Edinburgh International Festival in the same year. He was honoured with the prestigious Padma Shri in 1989, conferred by the Government of India. Thiyam's international recognition began in 1984, when he was awarded the Indo-Greek Friendship Award by the Government of Greece. In 1990, he received the Diploma of Cervantino International Festival from Mexico, recognizing his participation in the festival and his efforts to promote cultural exchange. In 2005, Thiyam received the Kalidas Samman, presented by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Three years later, in 2008, Thiyam received the John D. Rockefeller Award, which recognized his contributions to the development of Indian theatre. In 2011, Thiyam received the Bharat Muni Samman, presented by the Government of Odisha. The following year, in 2012, Thiyam received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship (Akademi Ratna), considered one of India's highest honours in the performing arts. Thiyam was awarded the Bhupen Hazarika Foundation Award in 2013. This award recognized Thiyam's contributions to Indian theatre and his efforts to promote cultural exchange and understanding between different regions of India.

Ratan Thiyam's theatrical oeuvre is a testament to his innovative approach, his mastery of theatrical craft, and his deep understanding of the human condition. His plays offer a profound exploration of Indian culture and tradition, while also showcasing his ability to reinterpret classical Western plays in an Indian context. His establishment of the Chorus Repertory Theatre, his tenure as director of NSD, and his notable productions at the BRM have all played a significant role in shaping the Indian theatre landscape. As a pioneering figure in Indian theatre, Thiyam's legacy continues to inspire and influence the world of theatre and beyond.

Check Your Progress

Mention some of the significant works of Ratan Thiyam. (60 words)

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5.5 The Theatre of Ratan Thiyam

Ratan Thiyam's *Chorus Repertory Theatre*, established in 1976 in Manipur, represents a unique confluence of tradition and modernity, where theatre is not just a medium of storytelling but an immersive, multi-sensory experience. With a dedicated ensemble of about thirty artistes, the repertory thrives on the actors' versatility, as they are skilled in multiple art forms, including Manipuri folk dance, music, theatre design, and the indigenous martial art *Thang-ta*. The theatre also incorporates traditional narrative forms like *Wari-Leeba* and *Moirang Purba*, classical raag-raginis, and drumming styles such as *Cholom*. These elements blend to create a composite theatre that is deeply rooted in the cultural ethos of Manipur while resonating with audiences globally.

One of the defining features of t.. His plays address the socio-political realities of Manipur—marked by unrest and turmoil—yet extend beyond the local to embrace universal human experiences. This duality enables his theatre to function both as a critique of specific historical conditions and as an exploration of existential and moral dilemmas faced by humankind. Thiyam's theatre places less emphasis on linear plot development and instead articulates its thematic concerns through visual effects and a distinct theatrical

language. His approach allows the audience to engage with the play not just as a narrative but as an experience that is absorbed through multiple senses—sight, sound, and movement.

Space in Thiyam's theatre is explored dynamically through light and actors' movement. The orchestration of movement transforms the actors from mere characters into integral components of a 'total theatre' experience. This organic interplay between actors, stage elements, and lighting creates a spectacle where the human body becomes a living canvas expressing profound themes.

Light plays a crucial role in delineating mood, time, and thematic nuances. It is often used symbolically to highlight contrasts—between violence and peace, order and chaos, oppression and resistance. Similarly, actors' movements are carefully choreographed, resembling dance and martial arts, which contribute to the rhythm of the performance. A single dance move, a simple gesture, or an expression can communicate complex narratives, making the visual and physical aspects of the performance as significant as the spoken word.

Thiyam's theatre is known for its extraordinary aural environment, created through a meticulous combination of voice, music, sound, and movement. The actors' vocal and breathing techniques are refined to produce an aural tapestry that complements the visual narrative. Elements such as stamping feet, whispers, drumming, and chants contribute to the soundscape, comparable to a musical score in a film. This orchestrated sound environment not only enhances the theatrical experience but also interprets and comments on the action on stage.

Actors in Thiyam's productions undergo rigorous training, emphasizing physical control, breath work, and aural precision. Their performances are marked by extraordinary body movements

that go beyond conventional acting techniques. Each performance demands an intense synergy between voice, body, and space, ensuring that every moment on stage is charged with energy and meaning.

Thiyam's experimental approach to narrative structure is relentless, resisting complacency and constantly evolving in form and style. His plays often feature the superimposition of multiple layers of plot, moving fluidly across different timeframes—past and present intertwine, reflecting a complex, non-linear storytelling technique. Language, too, fluctuates between archaic Manipuri and dialect, enriching the texture of the performance and anchoring it in its cultural context.

A defining characteristic of his productions is the presence of a dominant metaphor that guides the visual and thematic composition. For instance, in *Macbeth*, scenes are linked through a striking visual metaphor, allowing for an expressive interpretation of the text beyond its linguistic confines. This transformation of text through stage design and visual storytelling exemplifies Thiyam's approach to theatre as a holistic artistic expression.

Thiyam's theatre transcends conventional dramatic forms by integrating various art forms—music, light, theatre, painting, and poetry—into a seamless expression. Each element contributes to the totality of the experience, making his productions not just performances but profound artistic statements. The synthesis of these elements ensures that, despite being performed in Manipuri, his plays reach out to a global audience, their essence understood through the universal language of movement, sound, and imagery.

Stop to Consider

Here are a few excerpts from interview with this doyen of Asian Theatre, where he defines theatres and talks about what he wants to do through his theatre:

“For me (theatre) is a form of self-expression, one can express oneself through music, painting or poetry. I am concerned with a fusion of all these elements because I think that theatre is concerned with them all.”(Goswami Ratan Thiyam page 113)

“(….)I do believe in aesthetics. Good theatre requires a very high aesthetic standard. Otherwise, if you feel that you are an intellectual and that you think for the society? Then why don’t you just type out your ideas and distribute them to the audience? If the idea alone is so important, why does theatre require a transformation of ideas into particular situations?”(113)

“The Indian theatre should convey a kind of flavour which is not western. But in its highest achievements its finest examples, it attains a certain universality. I cannot say that my idea of aesthetics is universal until it reaches that level of attainment. I have performed in many places all over the world. The responses have been very different but they have also always been very positive. Not knowing the language, never stopped them from appreciating what seemed aesthetically pleasing to them” (114)

Check Your Progress

Write a note on the salient features of Ratan Thiyam’s theatre. (250 words)

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5.6 Summing Up

Ratan Thiyam, a distinguished Indian theatre director, playwright, and cultural visionary, has played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Indian theatre. As a leading figure in the Theatre of Roots movement since the 1970s, Thiyam has successfully blended indigenous performance traditions with modern theatrical techniques. A graduate of the National School of Drama (NSD) and later its Director, he developed a distinctive theatrical style that integrates elements such as *Thang-Ta*, a Manipuri martial art, and *Nata Sankirtana*, a traditional folk-dance form. His establishment of the Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal has positioned it as a premier hub for regional and national theatre.

Thiyam's theatre serves as a powerful medium for social commentary, often reflecting the turbulent history of his home state, Manipur, which has long grappled with violence and insurgency. His works offer a profound exploration of Indian culture and tradition while also demonstrating his ability to reinterpret classical Western plays within an Indian framework. A hallmark of his productions is the evocative use of light to shape mood, define time, and underscore thematic contrasts—between violence and peace, order and chaos, oppression and resistance.

Moreover, Thiyam's theatre is distinguished by its rich aural landscape, meticulously crafted through a fusion of voice, music, sound, and movement. His productions transcend conventional dramatic forms by seamlessly integrating multiple art forms—

music, light, theatre, painting, and poetry—into a unified artistic expression. His innovative approach, mastery of stagecraft, and profound insights into the human condition make him a towering figure in contemporary theatre.

5.7 References and Suggested Readings

Goswami, Dr. Ashish. Edited. *Ratan Thiyam: Through Others' Eyes*. Birutjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, 2024.

Awasthi, Suresh and Richard Schechner. “ “Theatre of Roots”: Encounter with Tradition”. TDR (1988-) , Winter, 1989, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter, 1989), pp. 48-69. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1145965>

Unit-6

Paper Ratan Thiyam: *Nine Hills, One Valley*

Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 What Happens in *Nine Hills, One Valley*
- 6.4 Critical Analysis
- 6.5 Summing Up
- 6.6 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *grasp* the basic storyline of the play,
- *evaluate* the play in terms of its form and content,
- *write* a critical appreciation of the play,
- *find* out the themes of the play.

6.2 Introduction

Founder of the Chorus Repertory Theatre in Imphal, and a former NSD director, Ratan Thiyam evolved a unique theatrical form and language, enriching Indian theatre heritage in important ways. Thiyam's plays often comment on social and political issues, especially the troubled history of Manipur, his home state. Manipur has faced many problems, including violence and conflict. His works explore Indian culture and tradition while also adapting Western plays in an Indian setting. A special feature of his theatre is the use of light to create mood, show the passage of time, and highlight contrasts like peace and violence or order and chaos.

Sound and music are also very important in his plays. He carefully combines voice, music, sound effects, and movement to create a rich and powerful experience. His productions mix different art forms—music, painting, poetry, light, and theatre—into one complete and artistic performance. His creativity, skill in using the stage, and deep understanding of human emotions have made him a respected and important figure in Indian theatre.

Nine Hills, One Valley is one of his most well-known plays. It shows his unique style and his deep concern for the social and political problems in Manipur. The play explores themes of conflict, identity, displacement, and the search for peace through a dream-like journey filled with symbolic meaning and visual beauty.

6.3 What Happens in *Nine Hills, One Valley*

As the stage lights up, the scene reveals a chaotic setting with *chhatras* (temple flags) scattered all over. Seven Old Women enter one after the other, performing a sacred dance under blue veils. Invoking supernatural beings, they offer delicacies—puffed rice, tobacco leaves, and fruits—in a rite of propitiation. Their purpose is to relieve the suffering of evil spirits and to bestow knowledge and courage upon future generations. As they depart, the stage darkens before lighting up again.

Next, sons are seen running to save their lives, while mothers, in desperation, search frantically, calling out for their children. The sons, struggling with starvation and trapped in dire circumstances, are eventually guided by their mothers as they walk unsteadily away. The mothers pray to God to lead them to a land of truth, beauty, and love, free from suffering. They also seek wisdom from the *Maichous*, seven wise men who are the carriers of history and

tradition. These wise men, sleeping with books of knowledge covering them, are disturbed by nightmares and awaken.

As the stage lights up again, the *Maichous* share their visions—peepul trees on fire, dead bodies floating in the river—grim premonitions of violence, atrocity, and famine. They lament the abandonment of culture and tradition by the younger generations, emphasizing the need for cultural resurgence. They believe that children should learn the languages to converse with God and wield swords not for killing but for prayers. With deep concern, they return to sleep, only to be tormented by another vision.

In their dreams, they witness *Gopis* performing the *Bhangi* dance. A demon called *Matam* (Time) amputates the dancers' hands, yet the severed hands continue to dance, creating a terrifying spectacle that even Time itself fears. The *Gopis* persist in their dance, singing an exquisite ode to Krishna (*Shyam*) adorned in divine attire and ornaments.

The wise men awaken again, troubled by the duality of what they have seen—the destructive force of Time juxtaposed with the ethereal beauty of the dance. They recall the cultural tradition of *rasa-purnima*, an autumnal dance and musical performance, and lament the decline of artistic heritage, including the lost traditions of Gostha Leela, Goura Leela, Bashok, and Moirang Sai. Nostalgic for the idyllic past of Manipur, the "oval-shaped land where golden rice plants sway forming undulating waves," they resolve to act before complete destruction sets in. Their mission is to write a new book of knowledge in a simpler form, accessible to the common people, to guide society out of devastation.

As they begin their work, people from the younger generation enter, reading aloud from newspapers. The news covers war, violence, bomb blasts, corruption, bribery, taxation, and draconian laws such

as AF(SP)A. The *Maichous* invoke seven great wise men, seeking forgiveness for past mistakes. Lifting their mats, they move about, meditating on the omnipotence of Time and acknowledging that all things are subject to its will. Despite this realization, they call for unity, solidarity, and human compassion. They perform rituals to drive away evil spirits and chant the names of the Seven Mothers.

Upon being invoked, the Seven Mothers return. The *Maichous* invite them to be seated on the pen, symbolizing the act of writing. They articulate guiding principles that take the form of prayers, such as: "Teach the tender babies to beat the rhythm of peace by instilling in their minds the song of love even before they learn to walk." They complete their book of knowledge, embedding crucial messages for humanity.

Their vision of independence transcends mere political freedom. It begins with self-transformation—purging vices and weaknesses that render people dependent. A truly independent society, they assert, must eradicate murder, violence, illiteracy, and social disparity. They also articulate economic independence, emphasizing the need to address unemployment, poverty, and food scarcity. In religious terms, they advocate for interfaith harmony and secular values. Their new social vision also critiques imperialist domination, asserting that "Independence can be achieved only when a country as a whole progress and becomes truly civilized."

With the book completed, the *Maichous* take up their scrolls and move about, howling. From backstage, voices rise in unison, shouting "Hey..Ho..Hey..Ho." The people call out to their Mother, praying for her to dispel darkness, redeem life and mind from violence, and usher in a future of peace. As they move downstage, forming a line, the traditional dragon boat, Hiyang Hiren, appears with a roaring noise. The Maichou pay obeisance to it. On stage, nine mountain ranges appear, and four mothers, each carrying a

child, step across the hills towards the Maichou, invoking their Epu (grandfather) and lamenting the erosion of a once joyous and harmonious way of life.

The play reaches its emotional crescendo as they express anguish over the disintegration of their land and the loss of fundamental rights—speech, vision, and hearing. They speak on behalf of those who cannot voice their sorrows. Despite their grief, they turn resolute, addressing their sons and daughters with words of care and consolation. They move downstage, placing lamps as offerings and allowing the babies to sit on their laps, symbolizing hope for the future. In a climactic outpouring of emotions, they call for harmony, coexistence, and peace.

As the lamps are lit, the stage darkens, then lights up again with a final song—an expression of gratitude from sons and daughters to their "compassionate Mother."

Stop to Consider

Glossary:

Chhatras: “Traditional decorated flag poles erected at temples” (83)

Maichou: Wise man

Shangi dance: A Manipuri dance-form. Various movements and gestures of Manipuri dance-forms are referred to in the text, such as *ChampraOkpi*, *ChampraKhaibi*, *Lashing Kappi*, *KhuiengLeibi*.

AF(SP)A: Armed Forces (Special Power) Act. It gives a power to Indian armed forces to maintain power in ‘disturbed areas’. It has been a bone of contention in Manipur. Though not explicitly elaborated, the mere mention of this Act reveals Thiyam’s political position.

Matam: Time

Gostha Leela, Goura Leela, Bashok: Forms of dance-drama or religious songs prevalent in Manipur.

Moirang Sai: A form of Manipuri folk song

Hiyang Hiren: Traditional dragon boat.

Epu: Grandfather

Source: *Manipur Trilogy* (pages 107-109)

Check Your Progress

Write down the 'story' of the play in your own words. (80 words)

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6.4 Critical Analysis of *Nine Hills, One Valley*

Nine Hills, One Valley is a remarkable departure from each of the recognized and canonical forms of theatre: realistic, Brechtian, naturalistic, absurdist, to name a few. From the viewpoint of plot development in an Aristotelian sense, it has nothing substantial to offer, nor is it a fierce play of ideas. Exposition of everyday reality or meditation on a single topical issue is beside its purview. In terms of the classical rules of unities (such as unity of time or place) this play does not fit into such a pattern. Evidently, there is a sense of place at work here. The title itself suggests its setting, but it is not confined to Manipur alone. Beyond the natural topography of Manipur which is surely Thiyam's obsession—the other two plays constituting the Manipur Trilogy of Thiyam are *Prologue* and *My*

Love, My Earth—is the reality of our globe itself. In a way, *Nine Hills, One Valley* is a play about the local and the global at the same time, the specific reality of Manipur as well as realities of so many places of the world. The play develops around a core idea and a message, but the message is as much for the citizens of the world as it is for the Manipuri audience. You might think that the play, though translated into English, is played everywhere by Thiyam's Chorus Repertory Theatre in Manipuri—a language not understood anywhere outside the Manipuri-speaking communities. Still, the play is an enormous success all over the globe, a fact that sensitizes us to the play's power that extends beyond verbal language. This capacity to bring theatre beyond the pale of verbal language is typically a 'Thiyam phenomenon', if I may put it in this way. The message, then, gets across to a global audience. But the message is not a complicated one. A reading of the text will certainly familiarize you to the play's obsessive ethical-social-philosophical concerns as well as its reiterated appeal to humanity. Though the message is not complicated one, the playwright addresses a very complicated world- a world not alien to you or me, but neither is the message any shallower for that. The play establishes the profundity of its idea, and sets up a deeper act of communication with the audience—be they from Manipur or from any part of our troubled world. The play persistently pleads for a primeval simplicity and defines humanness there. If one has to pick up something like a plot here, it is about circumstances that propel people to write a book of knowledge. But this book of knowledge is no encyclopaedia nor a metaphor for the western Enlightenment grounded in the hierarchical relationship of self and the other or legitimating power relations. The 'book of knowledge' has to be written in a simpler form because common people must understand it. This wider democratic and profoundly ethical communicative act is at the core of the play's diegesis, a communicative act that can

awaken humanity from its present condition of darkness and turmoil.

A remarkable achievement of this play (which is also reflected in other plays) is his sudden, dramatic expansion of vision from the local to the global. While loss of tradition and culture, premonition of a future disaster occupies the first part of the play in the context of Manipur's particular socio-cultural conditions, suddenly people surge into the stage, enacting a proliferation of newspapers from the world. The news headlines –read aloud by the Readers—proliferate and build up an incredible aural transcription of our contemporary world. Thiyam's introduction of this auditory montage of the contemporary times fluidly connects Manipur with Iraq, America or any other places of the globe. Gripping image of the conflict between forces of destruction and the pristine aesthetic urges and aspirations of humanity, articulated through the dance of amputated hands, suddenly finds newer, varied contexts. This surreal dance of severed hands can now be a metaphor for what happens to the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay, to cite a random example. The *rasaleela* – a cultural tradition from Manipur, then, resonates with varied places of our globe where war and destruction cause humanity to suffer. The sons of the Seven mothers, back in Manipur run, after this globalized aural scene of destruction and killing, to save their lives, mired as they are in struggle for livelihood and troubled by the prospect of famine. This local crisis is played out elsewhere in the aural representation of the globe, amplified in the more publicly 'known' events of destruction of World Trade Centre, Imperialist war in Iraq and Afghanistan, suicide bombing in Tunisia or in 2002 Gujrat riot. In other words, the confined world of nine hills and one valley widens to expose the reality of our contemporary times. But the world contacts back into the space of

nine hills where Maichous resolve to “Write a new Puya/On the page of this topsy-turvy eon”(97).

The play is conceived like a poem, not as a set of actions around a conspicuous storyline. Thiyam himself reveals that the play develops like a collage of thought (*Ratan Thiyam* 511-512). A central issue that also connects Manipur to the world is war and violence. *Nine Hills, One Valley* is a profound meditation on the horrors of war and violence, its ubiquitous spell, and on the need for a resistance against it through the transformations of the self and society. Thiyam’s power lies not in the strength of the solution offered but in the intensity of desire for such a transformation. The children – the Sons separated from their Mothers—are caught up in everyday struggle for living with the darkness of famine staring at them, are also a generation uprooted from their tradition and bogged down by a trap, as 4th Mother says: “My children! A trap in front of you and an arrow ready to shoot behind you—you have to escape from the trapped life and run away”. The trap may also suggest insurgency that arises from the complex socio-political matrix of Manipur, or may indicate the precarity of life in the state given the enforced Armed Forces (Special power) Act. Resistance against violence is echoed in every fibre of the text. Cautions against the ‘trap’ of violence articulated time and again, as the 6th Maichou says, “Ö my sons! O my grandchildren! Don’t take Nongphan Thengsou and LeiphanTengsou, the footste of martial arts as the ultimate menas, people’s minds are divided, all are irritated, be cautious the land is heading for utter chaos that will result in war”(88).

If reality of contemporary times is the play’s concern, its articulation happens through an ethnic form that lends it its peculiar dream-like quality. The visual pattern of light and darkness encompassing nine hills create a rather discontinuous, disruptive air of dream. The nightmares of the wise men foreground the forces of destruction.

The idyllic past stands in stark contrast to the nightmarish vision of the present. Gopis performing *raasleela* in the full moon of autumn night faces Matam who amputates their hands. The disembodied figures and severed hands keep dancing in what may be called the most surreal moment in the play. This dream-like air is an aspect of Thiyam's theatre. In his *Macbeth* the use of light and colour enhances meaning through creation of stunning, dream-like visual effect. *Macbeth* starts with the witches that look like trees in a forest, wailing and writhing, in their otherworldly garb. This nightmarish beginning scene evokes fear(<https://southwestsun.wordpress.com/2014/08/16/ratan-thiyams-macbeth/>).

In *Nine Hills, One Valley*, the otherworldly, dream-like atmosphere is achieved through a combination of visual symbolism, stylized movements, poetic language, and rhythmic music. The dream-like aura in the play is enhanced by Thiyam's masterful use of theatrical elements drawn from traditional Manipuri performance styles. Besides, consider the characters. They often appear more as archetypes or spiritual presences than individuals, and the hills and valleys themselves take on a mythical dimension, symbolizing both the serenity of ancestral land and the fragmentation caused by political conflict. The dialogues and monologues are often lyrical, imbued with philosophical musings that reflect the inner turmoil and collective trauma of the people. Spirits of the past are evoked, exorcising of the demons haunting the present is performed. The use of ethnic form is relevant here. Thiyam does not use ethnic form as a fixed, unchanging format; he experiments with it to create meaning and effect.

Here we arrive at another dimension of the play: its symbolism. Nine hills and one valley in the title manifestly denotes Manipur but also connotes image of a harmonious society, a society

demonstrating care and responsibility: nine men protecting a woman. The idyllic past for which one deeply aspires is this pristine scene of nature that embodies primordial human values. The sons of mothers run in divergent trajectories for their livelihood and falling into the trap of violence, while their mothers are calling them to turn back. The well-orchestrated spacialoement—across the valley, across various parts of the stage are laden with immense suggestive power. The idyllic past is symbolized by the vision of *raas-purnima* where “on the full moon night of *Mera*, when the moon is in its complete form, the melodious sound of performing *Raas* dance to the accompaniment of the Moibung echoes in all directions”(92). This idyll of the past is in sync with the ornamental imagery build up around the topography of nine hills:

“Ah! Much adored oval-shaped land where golden rice plants sway forming undulating waves. A land encountered by nine ranges of hills like a neckless studded with gems”(93).

Check Your Progress

- Comment on the theme of war and violence as depicted in *Nine Hills, One Valley*. (100 words).

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- Comment on Thiyam’s break with realism in the play. (60 words)

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- Write a note on the symbolic, dream-like and suggestive quality of *Nine hills, One Valley*. (150 words)
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6.5 Summing Up

Nine Hills, One Valley exemplifies Thiyam's innovative approach and serves as a powerful meditation on the turmoil afflicting his home state of Manipur—a region long beset by violence, insurgency, and identity-based conflicts. But, as we have discussed, this is also the turmoil all over the world. Thiyam brilliantly connects the local and the global in this play, making it at once locally relevant and universal. Thiyam's integration of multiple art forms—theatre, music, light, painting, and poetry—creates an immersive and unified aesthetic experience. In *Nine Hills, One Valley*, this convergence of forms generates a hypnotic aura, where ritualistic movements and stylized dialogues reflect both personal and collective trauma. The hills and valleys cease to be mere physical spaces; they become metaphors for a fractured homeland and a cultural memory under siege.

By drawing on the rich cultural traditions of Manipur while addressing contemporary issues, *Nine Hills, One Valley* encapsulates Thiyam's vision of theatre as a medium of social commentary, spiritual reflection, and cultural preservation. His profound insights into the human condition, combined with his

mastery of performance, position him as a towering figure in Indian and global theatre. This play, in particular, stands as a testament to the resilience of cultural identity in the face of violence and fragmentation, offering a poetic yet politically charged exploration of conflict and hope.

6.6 References and Suggested Readings

Thiyam, Ratan: *Manipur Trilogy*. Translated by Tayenjam Bijoykumar Singh. Wordsmith Publishers, 2008.

Goswami, Dr. Asish. Edited. *Ratan Thiyam Through Others' Eyes*. Birutjatio Sahitra Sanmiloni, 2024.

Block- II

Unit 1: Poetry from the North East: An Introduction

Unit 2: Modern Assamese Poetry

Unit 3: Chandra Kanta Murasingh: Slumber

**Unit 4: Mona Zote: What Poetry Means to Ernestia in
Peril**

**Unit 5: Anubhav Tulasi: “It’s Been Quite Awile
Vincent”, “Post-Mortem”**

Unit 6: Robin S. Ngangom: “Funerals and Marriages”

Unit-1

Poetry from the Northeast: An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Northeast: An Overview
- 1.4 Northeast Poetry: A Diverse and Vibrant Literary Tradition
- 1.5 Some Renowned Poets from the Northeast and Their Works
- 1.6 Common Themes
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *know* about the Northeast,
- *learn* about the prominent poets from the Northeast,
- *understand* Northeastern poetry as a literary genre,
- *analyse* the common themes.

1.2 Introduction

Northeast poetry refers to the rich and diverse body of poetic works originating from the eight states of India's Northeast region: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. This region, nestled in the easternmost part of India, is home to a diverse range of cultures, languages and literary traditions. This Unit provides an overview of the literary traditions of Northeast India, highlighting some of the most celebrated Northeastern poets, their literary works, common themes in Northeast literature, etc, showcasing the region's cultural

diversity. The literary landscape of Northeast India is characterized by its vibrant diversity, with writers drawing inspiration from their indigenous cultures, traditions, and experiences.

1.3 Northeast: An Overview

The northeast region of India, comprising eight states, is a melting pot of diverse cultures, languages, and literary traditions. This region, often referred to as the “cultural gateway” of India, has a rich literary heritage that reflects the unique experiences, histories, and perspectives of its people. The Northeastern Region of India, comprising the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, has been aptly dubbed the “Land of the Seven Sisters.” This sobriquet, coined by journalist Jyoti Prasad Saikia in 1972, has gained widespread recognition and acceptance, transcending regional boundaries. The term “Seven Sisters” metaphorically alludes to the unique cultural, geographical, and historical bonds rooted in the idea of unity in diversity. Sikkim has been added to the group of Northeast states later. Despite their distinct individual identities, the eight states share a common thread of interdependence. This unit attempts to delve into the intricacies of their relationships, highlighting the diversity as well as the commonalities that bind them together, specifically in the literary context.

Geographically, the North-Eastern Region is characterized by its strategic location in the easternmost part of India as it shares international borders with China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan. This unique positioning has fostered a rich cultural heritage, with each state boasting its own distinct traditions, customs, and languages. The region’s mesmerizing natural beauty, replete with beautiful hills and valleys, and majestic mountains, has further

contributed to its mystique. The region has been diversely influenced by the rich histories of various dynasties, empires, and colonial powers leaving their indelible mark. The Ahom dynasty in Assam, the Manipuri kingdom, and the Naga tribes, among others, have all contributed to the region's rich cultural tapestry. The impact of colonialism, particularly British rule, has also had a profound impact on the region's development, shaping its administrative, economic, and educational systems. In recent years, the North-Eastern Region has witnessed significant economic growth, driven by initiatives aimed at promoting infrastructure development, tourism, and human resource development. The region's strategic location has also made it an important hub for trade and commerce.

Northeast India's cultural heritage is a vibrant tapestry of traditional practices, art forms, and handicrafts. The classical dance forms, tribal heritage, traditional attires, and handicrafts are a testament to its rich cultural diversity. The numerous indigenous communities of the region, including the Bodos, Garos, and Nagas, have preserved their traditional practices and customs despite the influence of modernization. Hunting, land cultivation, and indigenous crafts are integral to the region's tribal heritage. Traditional attires in Northeast India are characterized by their simplicity, elegance, and functionality, which are often adorned with intricate designs and patterns. The region is also renowned for its silk industry, with states like Assam and Meghalaya producing high-quality silk fabrics. Northeast India is home to a diverse range of handicrafts, including bamboo and cane products, wood carvings, and traditional textiles. Bamboo and cane handicrafts, in particular, are an integral part of the region's cultural heritage. Each community in Northeast India boasts its own rich musical heritage, shaped by their unique cultural, social, and historical contexts. The region is home to a diverse array of musical genres, including folk, classical, and contemporary

styles. Notable musicians from the region, such as Bhupen Hazarika, Pratima Barua Pandey, Zubeen Garg, Papon, Anurag Saikia, Rewben Mashangva, and the Tetseo Sisters, have made significant contributions to India's musical landscape.

Stop to Consider

Two of the most prominent classical dance forms of India, Manipuri *Raas Leela* and *Sattriya*, originate from the Northeast region of India. Manipuri *Raas Leela*, a classical dance form from Manipur, is characterized by its intricate footwork, subtle hand gestures, and graceful movements. This dance form, often performed to narrate mythological stories, is a testament to the region's rich cultural heritage. *Sattriya*, another classical dance form from Assam, is known for its energetic and dynamic movements. This dance form, which originated in the 15th century, is deeply rooted in the region's Vaishnavite tradition. Both Manipuri *Raas Leela* and *Sattriya* have been recognized as "Classical Dances of India," underscoring the region's significant contribution to India's cultural landscape.

Northeast is a testimony to the region's unique cultural, geographical, and historical identity. As India continues to evolve and modernize, it is essential to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of Northeast India, ensuring that its unique traditions and customs continue to thrive for generations to come.

1.4 Northeast Poetry: A Diverse and Vibrant Literary Tradition

The Northeast region has a long history of poetic expression, with roots dating back to ancient times. The Northeast poetry has been shaped by its strategic location at the crossroads of Indian, Southeast

Asian, and Tibetan cultures. The influence of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and indigenous traditions is evident in the themes, motifs, and imagery found in Northeast poetry. The indigenous communities of Northeast India possess a rich cultural heritage, reflected in their ancient folktales, written texts, and literary masterpieces. The Northeastern writers have made significant contributions to Indian literature, exploring themes such as identity, culture, history, and social justice. The poetry of Northeast India is a rich and diverse literary tradition that reflects the region's unique cultural, linguistic, and geographical characteristics. Despite its heterogeneity, the poetry is often marked by common themes and motifs, including tension, torpidity, fear, and the quest for peace.

One of the defining features of Northeast poetry is its incredible linguistic diversity. Poets from the region write in a wide range of languages, including Assamese, Manipuri, Mizo, Naga, Khasi, and many others. This linguistic diversity has given rise to a rich tapestry of poetic voices, each with its unique tone, style, and thematic concerns. The region is home to numerous literary masterpieces, including the *Saptakanda Ramayana* in Assamese and the *Karbi Ramayana*, which demonstrate the profound impact of Hindu mythology on the region's cultural landscape. Another significant trait of Northeast Indian poetry is its ability to capture the stark realities of life in the region. The poetry often grapples with themes of identity, culture, and politics, reflecting the complex and often fraught history of the region. Eminent poets from the region, such as Robin S. Ngangom and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, often draw on mythology and folk-tales to explore these themes, creating a rich and nuanced portrait of Northeast Indian culture. The poetry of Northeast India is also characterized by its use of landscape and imagery to explore themes of identity, culture, and politics. Poets often use the natural landscape to create powerful images that reflect

the region's complex history and politics. For example, Robin S. Ngangom uses the image of the Umiam lake to explore themes of identity and culture in his poem "Umiam Lake". Temsula Ao, in her poem "The Naga Hills", uses the image of the Naga hills to explore themes of politics and identity.

The poetry of North East India is characterized by a profound ambivalence towards various aspects of life, including militarism, ethnicity, and love for the land, along with the complexities of human experience. The genius of the poets of Northeast is inherently reflected in their ability to find a deeper connection between the personal and the political, between the love for a woman and the love for the land. This connection is facilitated by the poets' use of imagery, metaphor, and symbolism, which serve to create a rich and complex tapestry of meaning. The poetry of North East India is a poetry of complementarity, where politics and love, chaos and order, are reconciled in a deeper and more profound understanding of human experience.

Stop to Consider:

Meitei Literature: A Rich Cultural Heritage

Meitei literature is a vital component of the cultural heritage of Manipur, a state in Northeast India. This literary tradition has a long-standing history, with roots dating back to the ancient Meitei kingdom. Meitei literature is characterized by its unique blend of mythological, historical, and cultural themes, which reflect the distinct identity of the Meitei people. The Sahitya Akademi has recognized the significance of Meitei literature by instituting several awards to promote and honour outstanding literary works in the Meitei language. These awards include **Sahitya Akademi Award for Meitei**, conferred annually on a distinguished Meitei writer for

Their outstanding contribution to Meitei literature; **Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize for Meitei** recognizes translators who have made significant contributions to the translation of Meitei literary works; and **Yuva Puraskar for Meitei** is presented to young Meitei writers who have shown exceptional promise and talent in their literary endeavours. The Patriotic Writers' Forum, a prominent literary organization in Manipur, has instituted several awards to recognize and honour outstanding Meitei writers. These awards include **Pacha Meitei Literary Award**, conferred on a distinguished Meitei writer for their significant contribution to Meitei literature; **R Kathing Tangkhul Literary Award** recognizes Tangkhul writers who have made notable contributions to Meitei literature; and **Dr. Saroj Nalini Parratt Literary Award** honours writers who have demonstrated exceptional literary talent and made significant contributions to Meitei literature. Meitei literature is a vital component of Manipur's cultural heritage, reflecting the unique identity and traditions of the Meitei people. The Sahitya Akademi awards and the Patriotic Writers' Forum awards recognize and honour outstanding Meitei writers, promoting the growth and development of Meitei literature. These awards serve as a testament to the richness and diversity of Meitei literary tradition, which continues to thrive and evolve to this day.

1.5 Some Renowned Poets from the North-East and Their Works

Let us discuss some of the most celebrated and renowned poets and their poetry from the Northeast:

- **Lakshminath Bezbarua**

Lakshminath Bezbarua (1864-1938) was a renowned Assamese poet, novelist, and playwright who played a pivotal role in shaping

modern Assamese literature. Commonly regarded as the Father of Assamese short stories, Lakhshminath Bezbarua was a key figure in the Jonaki Era, a period of romanticism in Assamese literature that spanned from the late 19th to the early 20th century.

Lakhshminath Bezbarua's literary contributions were multifaceted and far-reaching. Through his essays, plays, fiction, poetry, and satires, he infused new life into the stagnating Assamese literary scene. His works not only reflected the prevailing social environment but also sought to bring about positive changes in the society. Bezbarua's poetry collections, including *Kodom Koli* (1913) and *Podum Koli* (1968), demonstrate his mastery of Assamese poetry. His novel, *Podum Kunwori*, showcases his skill in storytelling. Bezbarua's short story collections, such as *Surobhi* (1909), *Xadhukothaar Kuki* (1912), and *Junbiri* (1913), reveal his ability to craft engaging narratives. Bezbarua's satire essays, published in collections such as *Kripabor Barbaruar Kaakotor Tupula* (1904) and *Kripabor Barbaruar Ubhutoni* (1909), showcase his wit and critique of societal norms. His plays, including *Litikai* (1890), *Nomal* (1913), and *Chikarpati Nikarpati* (1913), showcases his skill in crafting engaging dramas. His biographies, such as *Dinanath Bejbaruar Xankhipto Jibon Charit* and *Sri Sri Shankardev*, reveal his interest in preserving the lives and legacies of important Assamese figures. His autobiographical works, including *Mor Jiban Sowaran*, *Patralekha*, and *Dinalekha*, offer valuable insights into his life and experiences. Lakhshminath Bezbarua also made significant contributions to children's literature. His collections of folk tales, including *Junuka* (1910), *Burhi aair xadhu* (1911), and *Kokadeuta aaru nati lora* (1912), illuminates his commitment to preserving Assamese folklore. Furthermore, Bezbarua's English books, such as *History of Vaishnavism in India* and *Rasalila of Sri Krishna*, demonstrate his expertise in Indian

philosophy and religion. His other works, including *Kaamat Kritatwa Labhibar Xanket* and *Bhagawat Katha*, showcase his diverse interests and knowledge.

Lakshminath Bezbaruawas honoured with the title of “Roxoraj”, meaning “The King of Humour,” by the Asam Sahitya Sabha on December 29, 1931. This title was bestowed upon him in recognition of his exceptional satirical writings, penned under the pseudonym “Kripaabor Borbaruah.” Bezbarua’s literary prowess and innovative use of satire earned him a special place in Assamese literature, cementing his reputation as a master of humour and social commentary. The Asam Sahitya Sabha’s felicitation letter, which accompanied the title of Roxoraj, referred to Bezbarua as “Sahityarathi”, or “Charioteer of Literature.” This epithet acknowledges Bezbarua’s expertise in various branches of literature, including poetry, fiction, drama, and satire. His versatility and command over different literary genres have made him a legendary figure in Assamese literary circles.

As a pioneer of modern Assamese literature, Bezbarua’s influence extended beyond his own writings. He was instrumental in shaping the literary landscape of Assam, paving the way for future generations of writers. His innovative use of language, style, and themes helped to establish Assamese as a distinct literary language. Bezbarua’s satirical works, in particular, are notable for their biting critique of social ills and conventions. Through his satire, he sought to expose the hypocrisy and injustices of his time, advocating for positive change and reform. He was a founding president of the Asom Chattra Sanmilan (All-Assam Students’ Conference) in 1916, which played a significant role in promoting education and social reform in Assam. Additionally, he presided over the 7th annual session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha in 1924, further solidifying his position as a leading literary figure in Assam. His innovative and

influential writings, particularly in the genre of satire, have left an indelible mark on Assamese literature, cementing his place as one of the most important literary figures in Assamese literary history.

Lakhsminath Bezbarua died on March 26, 1938, at the age of seventy-four, marking a significant loss to Assamese literature and society. However, his legacy continues to be celebrated through the Asam Sahitya Sabha's annual observance of Sahitya Divas, which commemorates his contributions to Assamese literature. Bezbarua's literary contributions bear witness to his creativity, intellectual curiosity, and commitment to preserving Assamese culture and literature. His impact on Assamese literature and society is immeasurable. His innovative use of satire, his expertise in various literary genres, and his commitment to social reform have made him a beloved and respected figure in Assamese literary circles. His legacy continues to inspire new generations of writers, scholars, and readers, ensuring that his contributions to Assamese literature will be remembered and celebrated for years to come.

- **Hiren Bhattacharyya**

Hiren Bhattacharyya, affectionately known as Hiruda, was a distinguished Indian poet and lyricist who made significant contributions to Assamese literature. Born on July 28, 1932, Bhattacharyya's life was marked by a passion for creative expression, which ultimately earned him a revered place in the annals of Assamese literary history.

Bhattacharyya's literary journey commenced with the publication of his first poem in 1957. Over the years, he authored numerous collections of poetry, including *Rudra Kamana* (1968), *Kabitar Rod* (1976), *Mor Desh aru Mor Premor Kobita* (1972), *Sugandhi Pokhila* (1981), *Shoichor Pothar Manuh* (1991), *Mur Prio Bornomala* (1995), *Bhalpuwar Buka Mati* (1995), and *Bhalpuwar*

Dikchou Batere (2000). Bhattacharyya's poetry is distinguished by its lyrical quality, simplicity, and exploration of themes that are universally relevant. His use of language is characterized by its accessibility, making his poetry appealing to a broad range of readers. Through his works, Bhattacharyya sought to promote social consciousness, love, and humanity, leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape of Assam. Bhattacharyya served as the editor of several Assamese magazines and newspapers, including *Chitrabon*, *Monon*, and *Antorik*. He was also the poetry editor of the Assamese magazine *Prantik* for over three decades. Bhattacharyya's translations of Assamese poetry into English and Bengali have helped to promote Assamese literature globally.

Bhattacharyya's contributions to Assamese literature were recognized with several prestigious awards. In 1985, he received the Bishnu Rabha Award, followed by the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992 for his anthology of poems, *Saichor Pathar Manuh*. He was also conferred the Assam Valley Literary Award (Asom Upotyoka Sahitya Bota) in 2000. Bhattacharyya was awarded the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award in 1993, a testament to his remarkable contributions to the development and promotion of Indian languages. He was conferred the Rajaji Puroskar by Bharatiya Bidya Bhawan for the year 1984-85. In 1987, Bhattacharyya received the Soviet Desh Nehru Award, a prestigious international honour that recognizes outstanding contributions to the promotion of peace, friendship, and cultural exchange between nations. These honours serve as a testament to Bhattacharyya's enduring impact on Assamese literature.

Hiren Bhattacharyya passed away on July 4, 2012, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire generations of writers and readers. His contributions to Assamese literature serve as a testament to his dedication to creative expression and his commitment to promoting

the cultural heritage of Assam. As a poet, lyricist, and literary icon, Bhattacharyya's impact on Assamese literature will be remembered for years to come. His poetry collections, editorial endeavours, and translations have helped to promote Assamese literature globally, ensuring his legacy as a distinguished Assamese poet and editor.

- **Nilim Kumar**

Nilim Kumar is a distinguished poet and novelist in contemporary Assamese literature, renowned for his remarkable contributions to the literary landscape of Assam. With an impressive oeuvre of seventeen collections of poems and several novels, Kumar has established himself as one of the most popular and influential poets of his generation.

Kumar's poetic collections include *Achinar Akhukh* (1985), *Bari Kunwar* (1988), *Swapnar Relgaari* (1991), *Seluoi Gadhuli* (1992), *Topanir Baagicha* (1994), *Panit Dhou Dhoubor Mach* (1990), *Narakashur*, and *Atmakatha*. These works demonstrate Kumar's mastery of poetic forms and his ability to explore a wide range of themes, from the personal to the societal. In addition to his poetic works, Kumar has also authored several novels, including *Matit Uri Phura Chitrakar*, *Akash Apartment*, and *Athkhon Premar Uppannayas*. These novels showcase Kumar's versatility as a writer and his ability to engage with a range of genres and themes. Kumar's poetry has been translated into several languages, including Hindi, Spanish, and Manipuri. Notably, a collection of his poems in Hindi translation, *Nilim Kumar ki Srestha Kabita*, was published by Presidency University, Kolkata, in 2011. Kumar has also translated the poems of Kedarnath Singh into Hindi, publishing them as an anthology, *Bagh Aru Annya Kabita*.

Nilim Kumar is a prominent voice in contemporary Assamese literature, celebrated for his poetic and novelistic works. Kumar's

contributions to Assamese literature have been recognized with several awards, including the Raza Foundation Award (2009) and the Uday Bharati National Award (1994). His contributions to the literary landscape of Assam have been significant, and his engagement with cross-cultural exchange and collaboration has facilitated the dissemination of Assamese literature to a broader audience.

- **Thangjam Ibopishak**

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh is a prominent poet from the Northeast of India, from the state of Manipur, born in 1948. Writing in Manipuri, the language of the indigenous Meitei community, Ibopishak has established himself as one of the most popular and influential poets of his generation. Some of his most widely acclaimed poems include “Dali, Hussain, or Odour of Dream, Colour of Wind”, “I Want to be Killed by an Adult Bullet”, “The Wish”, “The Meitei and the Sacred”, and “The Land of the Half-Humans”.

Ibopishak’s poetry is characterized by its dark vision, satire, and critique of the socio-political landscape of Manipur. His poems often explore themes of insurgency, terrorism, ethnic conflict, and state brutality, offering a scathing indictment of a region gripped by violence and turmoil. As evident in poems like “The Land of the Half-Humans,” Ibopishak’s work is marked by a bleak portrait of a damaged society, where the individual is trapped in a state of perpetual internal strife. Ibopishak’s poems have been translated into English by noted poet Robin Ngangom, facilitating the dissemination of his work to a broader audience.

Ibopishak has published six volumes of poetry, three of which have earned him prestigious awards in the state. Notably, he received the Manipur State Kala Akademi Award in 1986, the Jamini Sunder

Guha Gold Medal in 1989, and the First Jananeta Irabot Award in 1997. Additionally, he was conferred the Ashangbam Minaketan Memorial Award in 2005. Ibopishak's most notable national recognition came in 1997 when he received the Sahitya Akademi Award for poetry.

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh is a significant voice in Manipuri poetry, who offered a powerful critique of the socio-political landscape of Manipur through his literary compositions. His poetry, marked by its dark vision and satire, provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of Manipuri society. As a leading poet of his generation, Ibopishak's work continues to be widely read and studied, both within and outside the Northeast of India.

- **Robin S Ngangom**

Robin Singh Ngangom, born in 1959, is a distinguished bilingual poet from Imphal, Manipur, in North Eastern India. He is renowned for his poetic works in both English and Meiteilon, a language spoken in Manipur. Ngangom's literary career is marked by his academic pursuits, teaching, and writing, which have significantly contributed to the literary landscape of North Eastern India.

Ngangom's poetic oeuvre includes three notable collections: *Words and the Silence* (1988), *Time's Crossroads* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). These collections demonstrate his mastery of language and form, as well as his ability to explore themes that are both universally relevant and uniquely rooted in the cultural and geographical context of North Eastern India. Some of his famous poems include "To Poetry", "The Dead Shall Mourn the Living", "Imphal", "The Ignominy of Geometry", "Middle-class Blues", "My Invented Land", "Postcard", and "Funerals and Marriages". In addition to his poetic works, Ngangom has also made significant contributions to literary criticism and translation. His essay, "Poetry

in a Time of Terror,” appeared in *The Other Side of Terror: An Anthology of Writings on Terrorism in South Asia*, published by Oxford University Press in 2009. This essay showcases Ngangom’s ability to engage with complex themes and issues, offering a meticulous understanding of the intersection of poetry and politics.

Ngangom pursued his academic interests in literature at St. Edmund’s College and the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. His academic background has not only informed his writing but also equipped him with the expertise to teach literature. Ngangom taught at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Ngangom’s contributions to literature have been recognized with the Katha Award for Translation in 1999. This award acknowledges his efforts to promote literary exchange and understanding between languages and cultures.

Robin Singh Ngangom is a significant voice in contemporary Indian poetry, whose academic background, teaching, and writing have significantly contributed to the literary landscape of North Eastern India. Through his poetry, essays, and translation, Ngangom continues to engage with complex themes and issues, offering a nuanced understanding of the cultural, geographical, and political context of North Eastern India.

- **Ralte L Thanmawia**

Ralte L. Thanmawia is a renowned Indian educator and writer from Mizoram, whose contributions to the field of education and literature is immense. Thanmawia completed his academic journey at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), where he earned his Bachelor’s degree in 1979, Master’s degree in 1981, and Ph.D. in 1989. His academic excellence paved the way for a distinguished career in education, which spanned over four decades. Thanmawia began his career as a Lower Division Clerk (LDC) with the

Government of Mizoram in 1976. He then transitioned to academia, working as a lecturer at Government Aizawl College in 1981. In 1989, he joined Pachhunga University College, and finally, in 2004, he became a part of Mizoram University, where he served until his retirement in 2020.

Thanmawia is a prolific writer, and his literary works include poetry, short stories, and essays. Some of his notable poetic works include *Mizo Ram* (Mizo Poetry), a collection of poems that explores the themes of love, nature, and social issues; *Hlim Hlim A Thleng* (The Echoes of the Soul), a collection of poems that delves into the human condition, exploring themes of identity, culture, and spirituality; and *Zoram Khawvel* (The World of Zoram), a collection of poems that celebrates the beauty of Mizoram's culture, history, and natural landscape.

Thanmawia's contributions to education and literature have been recognized with several awards and honours. In 2012, he was conferred with the Padma Shri, the fourth highest Indian civilian award, by the Government of India. He also received the Mizo Academy of Letters Award in 2016, a testament to his significant contributions to Mizo literature.

Ralte L. Thanmawia is a distinguished educator and writer from Mizoram, whose academic and literary contributions have had a profound impact on the region. His commitment to education and literature has inspired generations of students and writers, and his awards and honours are a testament to his dedication and excellence. As a scholar and writer, Thanmawia continues to be a vital voice in Mizo literature, and his works remain an essential part of Mizoram's cultural heritage.

- **Temsula Ao**

A celebrated Naga poet, writer, and scholar, Temsula Ao was a pioneering figure in Indian literature who has written extensively on Naga culture, history, and identity. Born in 1945, Ao was a multifaceted Indian scholar, poet, fiction writer, and ethnographer who left an indelible mark on the literary and academic landscapes of India. She was a distinguished professor of English at North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), where she taught for several years before retiring in 2010. Her academic expertise and leadership skills were further recognized when she was appointed as the director of the North East Zone Cultural Centre between 1992 and 1997.

Temsula Ao was a prolific writer, and her literary works have been widely acclaimed for their exquisite exploration of themes related to identity, culture, and social justice. Her notable works include the short story collection *Laburnum for My Head*, which received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in the short story category. This award is a testament to Ao's mastery of the short story genre. Ao's poetic oeuvre comprises seven seminal works, including *Songs that Tell*, *Songs that Try to Say*, *Songs of Many Moods*, *Songs from Here and There*, *Songs from The Other Life*, *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988-2007*, and *Songs along the Way Home*. Notably, her collection, *Songs along the Way Home*, presents a selection of 50 poems, undertaking a broad exploration of the human experience. In recognition of her outstanding contributions to literature and education, Ao was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours. Her works have been translated into several languages, including Assamese, Bengali, French, German, Hindi, and Kannada, illuminating her literary genius to a diverse range of readers.

A culmination of her scholarly research was published in 1999 by Bhasha Publications in Baroda, under the title "The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition." This seminal work is widely regarded as the most

authoritative and authentic document on the Ao Naga community, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of their cultural heritage. She has made significant contributions to literary criticism, notably with the publication of *Henry James' Quest for an Ideal Heroine* in 1989 through Writers Workshop. This scholarly work demonstrates her expertise in analyzing literary themes and motifs. Some of her other significant literary works include *These Hills Called Home: Stories from A War Zone* (2005), a narrative that delves into the experiences of individuals living in conflict zones and *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2000), an ethnographic study that documents and analyses the oral traditions of the Ao-Naga community. She has also written a memoir, *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* (2014), which offers a personal and introspective account of her life experiences.

Temsula Ao was a pioneering figure in Indian literature and education, whose contributions have had a lasting impact on the academic and literary landscapes of India. As a scholar, educator, and cultural preservationist, she played a vital role in promoting the cultural heritage of North East India. Her remarkable career serves as a testament to her dedication, passion, and commitment to education, literature, and cultural preservation.

- **Easterine Kire**

Easterine Kire, a distinguished Indian poet and author, has made significant contributions to the literary landscape, particularly in the realm of Naga literature. Born in 1959, Kire's oeuvre is characterized by a deep-seated commitment to preserving the oral narratives of the Nagaland people, thereby creating a written tradition of Naga literature. She achieved her doctorate degree in English literature from the esteemed Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Easterine Kire is a prolific Naga poet and novelist, renowned for her poignant and evocative portrayals of Naga culture, identity, and experiences. Her literary career spans multiple genres, including poetry, novels, children's literature, and translation, with her first book of poetry being published in 1982, followed by her debut novel in English. Kire's novels, such as *A Naga Village Remembered* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* offer nuanced explorations of Naga society, delving into the intricacies of everyday life, the impact of war, and the shifting realities that have transformed the lives of Naga women. In addition to her novels, Kire has made significant contributions to children's literature, as well as writing articles and essays that reflect her deep engagement with Naga culture and society. Her translation of 200 oral poems from her native language into English is a testimony to her commitment to preserving and promoting Naga cultural heritage. Kire's latest publication, *Spirit Nights* (2022), continues her exploration of Naga experiences, identities, and cultural practices.

One of Easterine Kire's most notable achievements is her pioneering effort to create a written tradition of Naga literature. Through her writings, she seeks to capture the lived realities of the Nagaland people, providing a platform for their voices to be heard. This endeavour is particularly significant, given the rich oral traditions of the Naga community, which have been passed down through generations. She is also a talented performer of Jazz poetry. This genre-bending approach to poetry reflects her innovative spirit and willingness to experiment with different forms of artistic expression.

Easterine Kire is a trailblazing figure in Indian literature, whose contributions to Naga literature have left an indelible mark. Kire's academic background and literary expertise make her an authoritative voice in the field of Naga studies. Throughout her oeuvre, Easterine Kire's writing is marked by its sensitivity,

nuances, and empathy, offering a powerful counter-narrative to dominant discourses on Naga culture and identity. Her work has significantly expanded the canvas of Naga literature, providing a platform for the voices, stories, and experiences of the Naga people to be heard and acknowledged. Her research and writings have contributed significantly to our understanding of Naga culture, history, and identity.

1.6 Common Themes

Let us discuss some of the general themes prevalent across the vast genre of Northeast poetry:

- **Nature and the Environment**

The region's stunning natural beauty, from the Brahmaputra River to the Himalayan mountains, has inspired countless poems that celebrate the beauty and power of nature. Northeast India's unique cultural heritage and mesmerizing natural beauty have indeed inspired a plethora of poems that celebrate the majesty of nature. The mighty Brahmaputra River, which flows through Assam, is a recurring motif in Northeast poetry. Poets often describe its majesty, beauty, power, and how it has blessed to nourish all forms of life. Poet Nilim Kumar in his poem, "The Brahmaputra", describes the river as:

“The Brahmaputra’s mighty stream
Flows through the heart of Assam’s dream
With waters that nourish and sustain
The land and its people, forever to remain”

The Himalayas, which stretch across several Northeast states, is another popular theme that dominates Northeast poetry. Poets often describe their awe-inspiring beauty, spiritual significance, and

rugged terrain. For instance, Mamang Dai's poem "The Himalayan Odyssey", where she encapsulates the mountain terrain as:

"The Himalayas stand tall and proud
A challenge to mortals, a test of cloud
Their peaks and valleys, a treasure to share
A journey through the heart of the Himalayan air"

Northeast India's lush forests and diverse wildlife are also explicitly celebrated in the poetry of the region. Poets often express concern about the impact of human activities on the environment and the need for conservation. The poem, "The Forests of Arunachal", by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi is one such example:

"The forests of Arunachal, so green and so grand
Home to the wild elephant, the tiger, and the land
The trees sway gently in the breeze
A symphony of nature, wild and carefree"

The changing of seasons in Northeast India, with their distinct characteristics and moods, are another significant theme that pervades Northeast poetry. For example, "The Autumn Moon" by Nalini Prava Deka:

"The autumn moon, a silver glow
Lights up the night, with a gentle flow
The trees stand tall, with leaves of gold
A season of harvest, a story to be told"

The above-cited examples illuminate the rich natural heritage of Northeast India as well as illustrate the significance of nature and the environment in Northeast poetry. The region's unique cultural

heritage and enchanting natural beauty continue to inspire poets to celebrate the allure and power of nature.

- **Cultural Identity**

Poets from the Northeast often explore themes of cultural identity, tradition, and heritage, reflecting on the region's complex history and its place within the broader Indian cultural landscape. The theme of cultural identity is pervasive in the poetry of Northeast India, a region characterized by its rich cultural diversity, complex history, and strategic geographical location. The poets from this region often delve into the intricacies of cultural identity, tradition, and heritage, weaving a narrative that reflects the region's unique experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

One of the primary concerns of Northeast Indian poetry is the exploration of cultural identity, which is often marked by a sense of dislocation, marginalization, and resistance. The region's history of colonization, migration, and cultural exchange has resulted in a complex web of identities, with multiple cultures, languages, and traditions coexisting and intersecting. Poets like Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, and Easterine Kire from Nagaland exemplify this concern through their work.

In Mamang Dai's poetry, for instance, we see a deep engagement with the cultural heritage of the Adi people, an indigenous community of Arunachal Pradesh. Her poems often evoke the myths, legends, and traditions of the Adi people, while also reflecting on the impact of modernity and cultural change on their way of life. In "The Legends of Pensam," Dai attempts to reclaim and celebrate the cultural heritage of her community as she writes:

"In the heart of the forest, where the rivers meet,

Our ancestors whispered secrets, of the land and the sweet

Rice beer, that flowed like a river, in the days of our youth

When the gods walked among us, and the spirits sang in truth”

(Dai 23).

Similarly, Easterine Kire’s poetry explores the complexities of cultural identity in Nagaland, a state marked by its history of insurgency and cultural resistance. Kire’s poems often reflect on the tensions between tradition and modernity, culture and identity, and the ways in which these tensions shape the experiences of the Naga people. In “A Naga Village Remembered,” Kire recounts:

“The village remembers, the stories of old

The myths, the legends, the songs, the tales of gold

The ancestors, who walked, on the mountains high

Their spirits, still whispering, in the winds that sigh”

(Kire 15).

In addition to exploring cultural identity, Northeast Indian poetry also reflects on the region’s complex history and its place within the broader Indian cultural landscape. Robin S Ngangom in his poems, for instance, often engages with the history of colonialism and cultural imperialism in Meghalaya, reflecting on the ways in which these forces have shaped the cultural identity and experiences of the Khasi people. In “The Khasi Are a Myth,” Ngangom writes:

“We are the descendants, of the seven huts

Our ancestors, who came, from the mountains and the flats

We are the people, of the sacred groves

Our culture, a tapestry, woven from the threads of our past”

(Ngangom 12).

The theme of cultural identity is a central concern in Northeast Indian poetry. The poets from this region, such as Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Robin S Ngangom, often explore the intricacies of cultural identity, tradition, and heritage in a rapidly changing world. Their poetry not only reflects the unique experiences and challenges of the Northeast Indian region but also contributes to a broader understanding of cultural identity, diversity, and inclusivity in India and beyond.

- **Social Justice and Politics**

Many Northeast poets address social justice issues, such as poverty, inequality, and human rights, as well as political concerns, like insurgency, conflict, and nation-building in their literary compositions. The theme of social justice and politics is a pervasive concern in the poetry of the Northeast region of India. This region, comprising eight states, has historically been marked by political instability, insurgency, and social inequality, which have had a profound impact on the lives of its people. Northeast poetry, therefore, serves as a powerful medium for poets to express their concerns, critique the status quo, and advocate for change.

One of the primary social concerns addressed in Northeast poetry is poverty. Many poets highlight the stark economic disparities that exist in the region through their poetry. Despite being rich in natural resources, many communities of the region continue to live in abject poverty. Mamang Dai in her poem, “Arunachal’s Dilemma”, addresses the issue of poverty as:

“In the land of the rising sun
Where rivers wild and free have run
We search for answers, night and day
To the questions that have come to stay

Why are our people poor and weak?

Why do our children go to bed hungry and meek?"

Dai's poem underscores the paradox of a region rich in natural resources yet struggling with poverty and underdevelopment.

Another significant theme in Northeast poetry is the struggle for human rights. The region has witnessed numerous instances of human rights violations, including forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture. Poets have responded to these injustices by crafting poems that bear witness to the suffering of the people and demand accountability from those in power. Easterine Kire in her poem, "The Silence of the Graves", writes:

"In the silence of the graves, I hear
The whispers of the dead, their stories unclear
Of lives cut short, of hopes and dreams
That were crushed by the boots of the regime"

Kire's poem is a powerful indictment of the human rights abuses that have occurred in Nagaland, particularly during the years of insurgency and military crackdown. By invoking the "silence of the graves," Kire's poem highlights the erasure of the voices and stories of those who have been killed or disappeared.

Northeast poetry also engages with political concerns, such as insurgency, conflict, and nation-building. Many poets have written about the experience of living through conflict, the trauma and displacement it causes, and the struggle to rebuild and heal. Temsula Ao, in her poem, "The War That Has Not Ended", captures the experience of living through decades of conflict in Nagaland, where the sound of gunfire and the smell of smoke have become all too familiar as she writes:

"The war that has not ended

Has taken its toll on our lives

The sounds of gunfire, the smell of smoke

The fear that grips our hearts, the uncertainty that chokes”

The theme of social justice and politics is a dominant concern in Northeast poetry. Through their poems, the poets have tried to highlight some of the blazing concerns of the region such as poverty, inequality, human rights abuses, and conflict. Northeast poetry serves as a powerful tool for social critique and activism, and offers a unique perspective on the complexities and challenges of the region.

- **Mythology and Folklore**

The poetry of Northeast India is characterized by a profound engagement with the region’s rich mythological and folkloric heritage. Poets from this culturally diverse region draw upon the stories, legends, and myths of their respective communities to explore universal human experiences. This theme serves as a powerful tool for self-expression, cultural preservation, and social commentary in Northeast poetry.

The poetry of Thangjam Ibopishak, often incorporates mythological motifs from Meitei mythology. In his poem, “The Cry of the Piba”, Ibopishak draws on the legend of the Piba, a mythical bird said to possess extraordinary beauty and song. The poet uses this mythological reference to explore themes of identity, culture, and the human condition. Similarly, the poetry of Assamese writer, Nilim Kumar, frequently engages with the folklore of the region. In his poem, “The River and the Myth,” Kumar draws on the legend of the Brahmaputra River, which is said to have been created by Lord Shiva. The poet uses this mythological narrative to explore themes of environmental degradation, cultural heritage, and the human relationship with nature.

The use of mythology and folklore in Northeast poetry serves multitudinous purposes. Firstly, it allows poets to tune into the cultural consciousness of their communities, exploring themes and motifs that are deeply ingrained in the regional psyche. It also provides a framework for social commentary, enabling poets to critique contemporary issues and concerns through the lens of mythological and folkloric narratives. It further facilitates a sense of cultural preservation, ensuring that the rich mythological and folkloric heritage of the region is passed down to the generations to come.

Check Your Progress

- Write a note on the poetry from the Northeast with brief discussions of some of the important poetic voices from this area. (250 words)

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- Do you think that poetry from the Northeast constitutes a distinctive school of poetry? Comment on the variety and commonality of this poetry. (250 words)

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1.7 Summing Up

Northeast poetry is a vibrant and diverse literary tradition that reflects the region's unique cultural, linguistic, and historical context. With its rich themes, motifs, and imagery, Northeast poetry offers a fascinating window into the lives, experiences, and perspectives of the people of India's northeast region. The literary traditions of north-east India are a testament to the region's rich cultural diversity and heritage. The notable poets and their works highlighted in this unit demonstrate the region's significant contributions to Indian literature. Further research and scholarship are necessary to fully explore the literary traditions of north-east India and to promote a deeper understanding of the region's cultural heritage. In conclusion, the poetry of North East India is a unique and valuable contribution to Indian literature. Its ability to transmute chaos into sublimity, to reconcile politics and love, and to find meaning in the midst of disorderliness, makes it a poetry of profound depth and complexity. In the recent years, the poetry of Northeast has gained sincere recognition and heartfelt acknowledgement across the globe with increasing readership, accessibility, and critical and comprehensive scholarly works.

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Unit-2

Modern Assamese Poetry

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Genesis of Modern Assamese Poetry
- 2.4 Progressive Trend
- 2.5 The Modernist Phase
- 2.6 Literary Influences on Modern Assamese Poetry
- 2.7 Key Poetic Voices
- 2.8 Other Poets
- 2.9 Contemporary Scenerio
- 2.10 Summing Up
- 2.11 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *identify* the historical phases of modern Assamese poetry,
- *learn* about the role of magazines in promoting poetic culture,
- *write* about the literary influences of Bengali and European poetry in modern Assamese poetry,
- *identify* some of the key figures of modern Assamese poetry,
- *develop* an understanding of the contemporary scenario.

2.2 Introduction

Assamese poetry has undergone a profound transformation over the decades, mirroring the region's rich cultural diversity and historical experiences. Its evolution from the early Romantic impulses to the

complex expressions of modernity reveal a vibrant interplay between tradition and innovation. The rise of the *Jonaki* era in the late nineteenth century marked a pivotal point in Assamese literary history, infusing poetry with Romantic sensibilities centred around nature, emotion, nationalism, and personal longing. This phase, often referred to as the *Romantic Renaissance*, laid the groundwork for a later, deeper shift towards modernism. The 1940s signalled a significant transition, with the publication of *Jayanti* magazine introducing progressive themes and a new aesthetic vision. Influenced by global literary movements, socio-political upheavals, and the aftermath of World War II, Assamese poets began to move away from the idealized romanticism of earlier decades. They embraced a more critical and introspective mode of writing, seeking to capture the fragmented realities of contemporary existence. This shift marked the beginning of Modern Assamese poetry, characterized by greater psychological depth, social realism, existential angst, and stylistic experimentation. Modern Assamese poetry is not a monolithic phenomenon but encompasses a broad and dynamic spectrum. Poets like Amulya Barua, Nilmoni Phukan, and Nabakanta Barua were among the early torchbearers of modern sensibility, questioning traditional forms and themes. Later generations witnessed the emergence of varied voices such as Hiren Bhattacharya, who infused lyricism with profound emotional intensity; Harekrishna Deka, whose poems often grappled with alienation and urban complexity; and Nilim Kumar, who brought an avant-garde boldness to Assamese verse. It is not possible to present even the broad map of modern Assamese poetry within the limited scope of this unit, let alone capture the diverse sensibilities and trends encompassed under its expansive rubric. This unit offers a general introduction to modern Assamese poetry, providing a foundational overview. Those interested in delving deeper into this

rich and varied field are encouraged to pursue further exploration — an endeavour that is both rewarding and worthwhile.

2.3 Genesis of Modern Assamese Poetry

The discourse of ‘modern Assamese poetry’ is huge and multi-layered, and cannot be summed up in a single unit. What counts as modernity in poetry itself requires extensive study and reflection. In a broad, inclusive way, the history of modern Assamese poetry must be traced to the publication in 1889 of a literary magazine named *Jonaki* by Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agarwala, and Hem Chandra Goswami. The history of modern Assamese literature was deeply enmeshed with the publication and circulation of magazines and periodicals. Hence, in so far as the trajectory of modern Assamese poetry is concerned, *Jonaki* can be said to be the earliest sign-post. The objective of *Jonaki* was progress of Assamese language and literature as well as the progress of the country. A non-political undertaking as it was, *Jonaki* sought to achieve all-round development of the nation and poets practicing poetry in this platform were swayed by the western liberal humanism and romanticism premised upon the potential of individual mind. The tradition of poetic romanticism created by *Jonaki* persisted through *Bijuli*, *Usha*, *Bahi* and *Surabhi* and *Abahan*, until *Jayanti* emerged for brief duration in the mid-1940s and brought this immensely influential romantic tradition to a virtual close.

Romanticism in Assamese *avatar* meant a search for beauty beyond the limits of sensory and the ordinary, and cherished an airy, idealist and transformative vision. Harekrishna Deka calls Romanticism as the first phase of poetic modernity because it goes beyond the limitations of mental-spiritual ethos of Neo-Vaishnavism. The

persistent tradition of bhakti inspired the notion of a self that recognizes its limitations and sub-serves the Almighty. The Romantic poets called for exploring the imaginative-creative power of the self and, in turn, projected a wish for a visionary transformation of the world (*Adhunik Kabita* 9-28). Modernity is not a temporally bound concept: every historical age does have its own elements of modernity that clashed with tradition. The early stirrings of Assamese poetic modernity, felt in the poetry of the romantically inclined poets, had a socio-political and cultural backdrop. In the wake of Assam being annexed to the British empire, educational initiatives taken by the British and the Baptist Missionaries were responsible for the spread of new ideas among a section of the Assamese middle class. The publication and introduction of text books, circulation of *Arunodoi*, the first Assamese magazine that started in 1846, the persistent struggle by Ananda Ram Dhekiyal Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Hem Chandra Barua, to rehabilitate the Assamese language, and the persistent struggle for Assamese language and literature by Lakshminath Bezbarua, Chandra Kumar Agrawala and Hem Chandra Goswami—all of these developments prepared the ground for the modern consciousness to emerge. Without these historical developments in the nineteenth century, the ‘foreign’ ideals of romanticism would not have struck roots in the soil of Assamese literature. The first phase of modern poetry, as labelled by Deka, then, is a huge period: it started with Jonaki and ended with the onset of the World War II. This broad romantic sensibility had its multiple dimensions. For one thing, impassioned sentiments of patriotism was a major aspect of this early modern phase. The poetry of Kamala Kanta Bhattacharya, Prasanna Lal Choudhury, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury were stuffed with the fervid air of love for the country. Many poets from Lakshminath Bezbarua to Parbati Prasad Barua carried a fervid zeal for reconstructing the nation and

reforming the society on the pedestal of the ideals of liberal humanism. Therefore, a major character of the early Assamese poetry is its outward inclination and its social thought and sentiments.

2.4 Progressive Trend

As Deka contends, the second phase of this trajectory of modern Assamese poetry is the efflorescence of progressive poetry in 1940s. The larger backdrop of this strain of poetry was constituted by the deeply and widely felt impact of the anti-colonial struggles known as the independence movement of India, and a new consciousness about social reality. Years before Jayanti of 1943, Dharendra Nath Dutta's poetry collection *Abhijan* was published in 1935. Dhiren Dutta's poems lambasted the airy idealist disposition of romantic poetry and illustrated a new kind of poetic language that depict harsh social reality with a voice of protest. *Jayanti*, published in a new avatar and circulating till 1946, played the most crucial role in fermenting poetic modernity in 1940s—a decade rife with political and economic turmoil and the dark experience of the World War. The magazine was revived by the likes of Kamal Narayan Dev, Chakreswar Bhattacharjya and Bhabananda Dutta and it created a patently anti-romantic ethos. The emotional appeal of regeneration and patriotism evident in the romantic poetry lost its lustre in the face of new political development. Bhabananda Dutta observes that the failure of 1943 Quit India Movement struck a blow to the romantic dream of regeneration, creating an air of anguish and pessimism all around. The impact of the historical experience of war was multifarious. Moral degradation of the affluent classes came to constitute a theme in literature. Limits of the possibilities of liberal humanism were exposed in the face of the disruptions of socio-political events from the war to the famine of 1943. In the context of

this bleak social reality Marxist ideals was a great inspiration to many. Kamal Narayan Dev and Charakreswar Bhattacharjya, the editor-duo of *Jayanti*, argues about the necessity of assuming class position in a society divided into antagonistic groups of the exploiter and the exploited. While the romantic patriot of earlier poetry looked forward to the progress of the nation and society, *Jayanti* fostered the ideals of dialectical progress of society through the dynamics of class-struggle (Deka “Dwitiya Parba”, 29-51). Key figures of this trend are Bhabananda Dutta (1918-1959), Dhiren Dutta (1910-), Jyotiprasad Agrawala (1903-1951), Amulya Barua (1924-1946) and Hem Barua (1915-1977). Amulya Barua, the most representative of progressive poetry of 1940s carried to Assamese poetry a new thought and consciousness with poems such as “Kukur”, “Beshya”, “Biplabi”, “Koyla” etc. Other poets that belonged to this school include Naba Kanta Barua, Ajit Barua, Keshab Mahanta, Ram Gogoi, Syed Abdul Malik and Maheswar Neog.

2.5 The 'Modernist' Phase:

The long reign of romantic poetry that started with the publication of *Jonaki* came to an end in 1940s. Poetic practice had degenerated into a mechanical exercise with little attention to the reality that had changed. We have hinted at the tumultuous time of 1940s. In the 1950s, following the publication of *Ramdheni*, two significant things happened. First, progressive poetry lost its vigour and convictions, yet thrived through a tenuous stream. Second, experiments in poetic language began to be carried out and poets strove to articulate their responses to the modern life and world. Harekrishna Deka calls this trend of poetry ‘modernist’, and enumerates a few of its traits. In the first place, modernist Assamese poetry militates against the aestheticist thrust of romanticism or

class-consciousness of progressivism. Self-consciousness and integration of thought and emotion became a dominant aspect of poetry. It is in this phase that Assamese poetry began to be influenced by western poetic ideals, especially that of Eliot and Ezra Pound. Such movements as symbolism, imagism and the newly revived metaphysical poetry encouraged the poets for modernist experiments, thereturn to the individual did not necessarily mean escape from reality, but the poets on the contrary began to focus on the modern human reality. In this experimentation with language and form, an early sign-post of Ajit Barua's short lyric "Mon Kuwali Samay", was published in The poem articulates the experience of time in a fine morning. This is a purely subjective time and the elusive nature of this subjective experience cannot be captured in conventional language and diction. He uses unusual combination of words—compound words, after G. M. Hopkins while the words are not fitted to a pattern that creates a rhythm. The unrhythmical character of the syntax, inventive use of compound words, and the overall spacing of the poetic lines—all work to evoke the very experience he seeks to describe. But this is a complex experience of the present time, because the past suddenly permeates the present consciousness through memory. The poetic persona recalls the fear of not having brought to school the map of Kamrup district, and this fear is likened to the anxiety over possible fall from the mouth of a dog a piece of meat in a story –which was part of his school lessons. The past here is then reconnected to the present where the persona finds himself alone in a vast field with no certain road ahead. Thus, through images and linguistic experiments "Mon Kuwali Samay" enacts a particular aspect of modern experience. Influence of western aesthetics is discernible even in this short lyric of Ajit Barua.

2.6 Literary Influences on Modern Assamese Poetry

Let us, then, discuss how Western literary and cultural experience had its important role in shaping modern Assamese poetry. Lopa Barua writes about the widespread influence of the Bengali poet Jibananda Das in modern Assamese poetry. The 'presence' of Jibananda can be sporadically felt in the poetry of Homen Borgohain, Naba Kanta Barua, Biren Borgohain, Prafulla Bhuyan, Sushil Sarma, Hiren Bhattacharjya, Nilamoni Phukan, Bireswar Barua and others. Hem Barua, a pioneering figure in modern Assamese poetry both in terms of content and form, was particularly influenced by his reading of Bengali poetry, and in his focus on women and representation of nature, the influence of Jibananda can be particularly felt. In Naba Kanta Barua, as Lopa Barua demonstrates in her dissertation, both the pattern of prose rhythm and imagistic language of Jibananda Das's poetry influenced the Assamese poet. In Nabakanta Barua, inspiration for sensuous imagery and especially the use of synaesthesia for the articulation of a certain feeling came, among other things, from Jibananda. Homen Borgohain also owes to the Bengali poet especially in his portrayal of warmth of village life and depiction of solitude.

Western poetry had a key role in shaping the modernist sensibility in Assamese poets. Amulya Barua was inspired by W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis Meniece, Cecil Day Lewis, Rimbaud, Luis Aragon, Eliot and Sudhindranath Dutta. Hem Barua had closer link with British literature. Following Eliot, he mingled the serious with the ludic and used familiar idiom of practical life. Naba Kanta Barua was inspired by Eliot, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibananda Das, Buddhadev Basu and Amiya Chakraborty. Ajit Barua incorporated elements from metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Abraham Cowley, shaped language possibly owing to the influence of G.M.Hopkins and Eliot. Imagist movement in the west indirectly

influenced Nilamoni Phukan, so also symbolism. Nilamoni Phukan used private symbols. He experimented with language. Bireswar Barua's vision of an ugly world is inspired by Eliot.

2.7 Key Poetic Voices

As I said, modernity is not a historically fixed phenomenon. Every historical time has its own sense of tradition and modernity, and reflected in literature and poetry. The broad spectrum of modern Assamese poetry would make us consider hundreds of individual poets. However, here I would like to give notes on certain key voices of poetic modernity. They occupy a huge space in the canon of modern Assamese poetry. But let me also concede that the discourse of modern Assamese poetry is never closed off; many voices from the margins still deserve to be considered for a fuller understanding of this broad arena.

Nabakanta Barua (1926-2002): Nabakanta Barua occupies a significant place in modern Assamese poetry, especially for his bold articulation of urban consciousness. His early poems are rooted in the dark realities of urban life—its squalor, alienation, and the mechanical monotony of city existence. Drawing from his prolonged stay in Calcutta, Barua vividly portrays the fragmented, individualistic, and consumer-driven urban experience. The mechanical aura and existential disquiet of metropolitan life find sharp expression in his poetry, reflecting the anxieties and deprivations of modern living.

Barua's exposure to European literature and modernist thought during his years in Calcutta left a lasting impact on his poetic sensibility. European modernist movements, often centred in urban milieus, grappled with themes like fragmentation, alienation, moral decay, and spiritual uncertainty—concerns that Barua also absorbed

and reflected in his own idiom. Among Western poets, T. S. Eliot's influence is particularly discernible. Barua's poems echo Eliot's *Preludes*, *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in their evocation of urban despair, inner emptiness, and existential solitude.

One of Barua's major works, *He Aranya He Mahanagar*, captures the conflicting forces of faith and faithlessness, vitality and the looming presence of death. His poem *Iyat Nadi Asil* too contemplates mortality with a deep sense of loss and dread. In many of his poems, death is not romanticized or seen as a passage to spiritual liberation; rather, it is a ruthless fact of life, associated with fear and anguish. This preoccupation with mortality began early in his life, leading him to study both Indian and Buddhist philosophies deeply. His poetic vision suggests that to overcome fear, the mind must be freed from temporal entanglements and cultivate a disinterested detachment.

Despite this philosophical engagement with death, Barua's poetry does not renounce the world. There is a persistent concern with worldly love, ethical decay, and the responsibilities of the individual in society. His modernist vision is both existential and socially reflective. Alongside Eliot, Barua was also influenced by poets such as W. B. Yeats and Walt Whitman, who contributed to the development of his lyrical intensity and moral questioning.

His long poems—*Dhritarastra*, *Rawan*, and *Ratnakar*—are notable for their profound engagement with the nature of the modern state and its contradictions. These works elevate mythic and epic figures to explore the crisis of modern political and ethical life, reinforcing his stature as a poet of both philosophical depth and contemporary relevance.

In sum, Nabakanta Barua stands out in modern Assamese poetry for his unique blend of urban realism, philosophical reflection, and mythic engagement. His work is a powerful testament to the anxieties of modern existence, rendered with lyrical finesse and intellectual vigour.

Ajit Barua: Ajit Barua is one of the most significant figures in modern Assamese poetry. Although his first published collection, *KisumanPadya Aru Gan*, appeared only in 1982, his pioneering contribution to Assamese modernism dates back to the late 1940s. The publication of his short lyric *Mon Kuwali Samai* marked a radical departure from conventional poetic forms. This poem broke away from the traditional rhythmic and metrical structures of Assamese verse, embracing instead the irregular, jagged rhythms characteristic of spoken language. It signalled a decisive shift in the poetic idiom, aligning Assamese poetry more closely with modernist sensibilities.

Barua's deep engagement with Anglo-American modernism is evident in his style and technique. He was particularly influenced by Gerard Manley Hopkins, especially in his use of compound words and striking lexical combinations. His work also reflects an affinity with modern French poetry, including the writings of Jules Laforgue, whose experimental tone and ironic stance seem to resonate in Barua's verse. Among English modernists, T. S. Eliot's influence is palpable, though Barua developed a distinct poetic voice of his own.

While Nabakanta Barua's poetry is often grounded in prose rhythm and a controlled lyrical flow, Ajit Barua eschews traditional rhythm altogether. This deliberate absence of metrical regularity serves to restrain overt emotionality in his poetry, allowing for a more austere, intellectually charged mode of expression. His quest for a new poetic form led him to experiment with conversational

language, phonetic textures, and elliptical allusions, all of which expanded the expressive range of the Assamese language.

Despite his modernist orientation, Ajit Barua's poetry frequently returns to rural memory and the sensuous richness of bygone village life. There is in his work a nostalgic undercurrent—a yearning for the warmth and vitality of traditional community life—which coexists with his formal experimentation and urban modernist concerns.

His later publications—*Brahmaputra ItyadiPadya* (1989), *Gas Premar Padya* (2000), and *Aru KisumanPadya Aru Gan* (2001)—further established his stature as a major poet. *Gas Premar Padya* is particularly notable as a bilingual edition that also includes the artwork of Rajkumar Mazinder; the poems from this collection were later incorporated into *Aru KisumanPadya Aru Gan*. In 2015, *Ajit Barua Kabita Samagra*, a complete collection of his poetry, was published, reaffirming his position in the Assamese literary canon.

His poem *Jengrai* (1963) is often cited as one of the quintessential modernist poems in Assamese literature. It showcases his distinctive use of spoken idiom, phonetic modulation, suggestive imagery, and layered allusions, offering a dense and powerful poetic experience.

Nilamoni Phukan: Nilamoni Phukan began his poetic career in the 1950s, with his first collection of poems, *Surja Heno Nami Ahe Ei Nodiyedi*, published in 1963. This was followed by several important collections, including *NirjanatarSabda* (1965), *Aru Ki Noisabda* (1968), *Fuli Thaka SurjamukhiFultor Fale* (1972), *Kait Golap Aru Kait* (1975), *Golapi Jamur Lagna* (1977), *Kabita* (1981), *Nrityarata Prithibi* (1985), and *Alap Agate Ami Ki Katha Pati Asilo* (2003).

Deeply influenced by Nabakanta Barua in the 1950s, especially in terms of free verse and diction, Phukan developed a distinctly

romantic tone that was uncommon in contemporary Assamese poetry. Initially, he distanced himself from poetry that was overtly socially conscious or politically assertive. Ranjit Dev Goswami argues that Phukan wrote under the shadow of Jibanananda Das, indulging in airy subjectivism without achieving a truly original effect (*Prabandha 1973–2015*, 280). His early poems, laden with rhetoric and verbosity, showed little engagement with lived experience and often sought the exotic (*Prabandha*, 282).

However, critics have noted a marked transformation in his poetic evolution. In *Golapi Jamur Lagna*, he included fewer than half of his previously published poems, revising many of them. This self-editing gesture reflects Phukan's critical self-awareness and his desire to overcome earlier shortcomings. Bhaben Barua, in *Asomiya Kabita: Rupantarar Parba* (259–275), has insightfully examined Phukan's poetic development, at least up to 1975.

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, Nilamoni Phukan has been a guiding force in Assamese poetry. He enriched it in multiple ways, especially by laying the foundation for the imagist and lyrical trends that gained prominence. His poetic sensibility was rooted in childhood memories of rural life, nature, and a deep interest in sculpture and architecture. These influences permeated his work, and the tone of his poetry often echoed voices from folklore. The most distinguishing feature of Phukan's poetry is its imagistic character. Yet, these are rarely pure images: they are interwoven with the voice of a speaker. His symbolism lies in the suggestive power of his language. Words, in his poems, do not always serve as carriers of fixed meaning; they are often objects of poetic inquiry—realities in themselves, much like art or emotion. As *Kabir Basan* (104) notes, Phukan strives to transcend the denotative limits of language and evoke a sensuous universe through words themselves. Harekrishna Deka has observed that T. S. Eliot's

influence on Phukan is minimal (*Kabir Basan*, 114), likely due to Eliot's anti-romantic sensibility. Phukan's worldview—rooted in nature, folk culture, and a reverence for life and the cosmos—was incommensurate with Eliot's urban, philosophical modernism. Unlike Nabakanta Barua, who incorporated Eliot within the context of urban life in Calcutta, Phukan drew inspiration from non-British and non-European sources such as Chinese and Japanese poetry, Federico García Lorca, and the visual arts.

Dr. Hiren Gohain highlights a pivotal shift in Phukan's poetic journey—from solitary reflection to an active engagement with socio-political realities. Gohain sees *Nrityarata Prithibi* as central to this transformation, not just thematically but also in terms of poetic language (*Sat Samudrat*, 34). The poems in this collection synthesize Phukan's life philosophy, poetic experimentation, and a dialectical vision that accommodates contradiction and complexity.

Hiren Bhattacharjya:

Hiren Bhattacharjya, one of the most beloved modern Assamese poets, published his first poem in 1957, though his first collection, *Mor Desh Mor Premar Kabita*, appeared in 1972. This was followed by other anthologies such as *Bibhinna Dinar Kabita* (1974), *Kabitar Rod* (1976), *Tomar Gaan* (1976), and *SaisarPathar Manuh* (1991). What sets Bhattacharjya apart is his simple, lucid style that resonates with a wide readership. His poetic power lies not in complex imagery or symbolic depth, but in the phonetic-verbal texture of his language—a rhythm shaped by a remarkable configuration of words. He seldom relied on mythology or difficult allusions. Instead, his work celebrates the lyrical and expressive potential of ordinary words. In this sense, Bhattacharjya remained close to the romantic tradition, with self-expression being the central impulse of his poetry.

A distinctive feature of his verse is the elegant use of alliteration and assonance, through which he connects words into vivid, resonant poetic phrases. Many of his early poems embody a mode of lyrical self-expression, reflecting emotional states and the transformation of feelings through carefully chosen referential words and images. Sincerity, rather than irony, defines the tone of his work. Themes such as love, nature, society, and personal relationships frequently surface in his poetry. Youth and youthfulness emerge as recurrent motifs, often portrayed as a force of vitality that counters life's sorrow and disillusionment. The political turmoil of mid-twentieth-century Assam inspired his early writing, and traces of that inspiration lingered even after the turbulence subsided.

In his later poetry, Bhattacharjya increasingly turned to imagery drawn from agriculture and vegetative life. His poetic vocabulary became deeply rooted in the metaphors of soil, growth, and cultivation. Through a lyrical, romantic, and expressive aesthetic, he offered a distinctive response to the experience of modernity. Hiren Bhattacharjya thus remains a vital voice in Assamese poetry—deeply personal, emotionally resonant, and richly attuned to the music of language.

2.8 Other Poets

Modern Assamese poetry presents a rich repertoire of diverse sensibilities, ideas, and poetic forms, inviting multiple and divergent lines of inquiry. Its differences and variations resist being neatly pigeonholed into any single thematic framework. Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi was a romantic modernist whose poetry was shaped by the presence of nature and steeped in the bhakti tradition, yet remained acutely responsive to the violence and maladies of modern life. Central to her work was a lyrical vision that affirmed the

indestructible spirit of life. Hirendranath Dutta's poems are marked by dense forms and a poetic idiom that deftly captures the tremors and uncertainties of the modern age. His use of unusual metaphors, deep sense of human sympathy, and grounded human wisdom reflect a broad humanism, and his poetry remaining alive both to the bounty of nature and the complexities of social reality. Harekrishna Deka was deeply aware of the troubled socio-political realities of the last two decades of the twentiethcenturies of Assam, and some of such events threatened to break his inner tranquillity, yet he did not resort to a mode of direct self-expression, giving vent to his inner feelings but castigates the self, finally evolving a tragic vision of life that subsumes elements of terror, submissions and suffering. Bhaben Barua's poetry delves into the inner and subconscious mind, marked by a subtle levity within seriousness and a striking use of contrast. His work remains alive to the polyphonic nature of life, articulates a historical sense while asserting individualism, and above all, reflects a profound faith in the unity of being (Hiloidari). Bireswar Barua was influenced by poets such as Jibanananda Das, Jean Arthur Rimbaud, Rainer Maria Rilke, St. John Perse, and W.B. Yeats. Yet, his own poetry is marked by simplicity of expression, lucidity, and a strong belief in the poet's ability to communicate directly with readers. Mahim Bora secured a distinctive place in modern Assamese poetry with the few but remarkable poems included in his sole anthology, *Ranga Jiya*.

In the 1970s, poets such as Gyan Pujari, Rohini Kumar Pathak, Sananta Tanti, Toshaprabha Kalita, Raju Barua, Sarat Chandra Neog, Archana Pujari, Rafikul Hossain, Putul Hazarika, Jatindra Nath Borgohain, Dilip Phukan, Subhash Saha, and Mohan Krishna emerged on the Assamese literary scene. However, the ground for this new wave of poets had already been prepared by established

voices like Nilamoni Phukan, Bhaben Barua, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, and Hiren Bhattacharjya.

Stop to Consider

Mention some of the important poets discussed above, and briefly discuss their poetry. (150 words)

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2.9 Contemporary Scenario

From the 1980s onward, Assamese poetry entered a new phase of development, shaped significantly by the historical experiences of the Assam Movement, the rise of ULFA, and the conflicts that ensued. Sameer Tanti introduced a fresh idiom that conveyed social conscience and the suffering of marginalized communities. His poems articulate anguish, desolation, frustration, and anger, while also meditating on the complexities of contemporary Assamese society, including communal riots and social crises.

Anupama Basumatary explored the inner life of individuals, often disregarding rigid social norms and values, and portrayed the suffering and loneliness of women with sensitivity. Nilim Kumar emerged with a distinctive poetic voice that combined the dramatic with social awareness. His work explores both individual and existential anguish, illuminating the mundane aspects of everyday life from varied perspectives.

Anubhav Tulasi stands out for his economy of words and his fusion of folk elements with modernist sensibility. Rajib Barua's simplified diction often evokes comparisons to Wordsworth, yet he also demonstrates a unique satirical and narrative style. Pranay Phukan, with his lucid diction, leans toward metaphysical intensity, offering a refreshing voice in contemporary poetry. Bipuljyoti Saikia acts as both a witness to his turbulent times and a poet of philosophical depth, maintaining a strong sense of social conscience.

Ajit Barua, known for his simplicity of style, was ironically attuned to the artificiality of modern life. As one critic notes, "He can be called a painter of the darker realities of rural life and he has been able to exhibit a strong sense of realized experiences of life" ("The Evolution" 29).

Hemanga Kumar Dutta, with his only collection *Athaba*, introduced a progressive form of poetry that blends social and political critique with rare philosophical insight. Poets emerging from the Mishing community, such as Ganga Mohan Mili, Jiban Narah, and Biman Kumar Doley, brought a new dimension to Assamese poetry by capturing the lived realities of rivers, trees, and folk life.

Numerous other poetic voices have also shaped the landscape of modern Assamese poetry, including Rajib Bora, Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati, Kushal Dutta, Mridul Haloi, Pranab Kumar Barman, Kamal Kumar Medhi, Pranjit Bora, Diganta Saikia, Bijoy Sankar Barman, Kabita Karmarkar, Ankur Ranjan Phukan, Pratim Barua, Bibha Rani Talukdar, Kamal Kumar Tanti, and many others. The mapping of contemporary Assamese poetry remains incomplete without acknowledging their contributions.

2.10 Summing Up

The rise of the *Jonaki* era in the late nineteenth century marked a pivotal moment in Assamese literary history, ushering in Romantic sensibilities cantered on nature, emotion, nationalism, and personal longing. This phase, often called the Romantic Renaissance, laid the foundation for a deeper engagement with modernity. The first modern phase of Assamese poetry, spanning from *Jonaki* to World War II, was a collective effort to infuse a modern consciousness into poetic expression.

In the 1940s, a progressive and anti-Romantic strand of poetry emerged through the journal *Jayanti*, with poets like Amulya Barua, Dhiren Dutta, Bhabananda Dutta, and Hem Barua contributing to its development. This was followed in the 1950s by a full-fledged modernist phase marked by the publication of *Ramdhenu*. Poets such as Ajit Barua, Naba Kanta Barua, Nilamoni Phukan, and Hem Barua explored new forms, linguistic innovations, and thematic complexity, drawing on both Bengali modernist poetry (e.g., Jibanananda Das, Buddhadev Basu, Amiya Chakraborty) and Western influences (e.g., G.M. Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Abraham Cowley).

Throughout, Assamese poetry has been open to diverse poetic cultures and has continually evolved to express changing social, aesthetic, and existential concerns. The works of key figures like Ajit Barua, Naba Kanta Barua, Nilamoni Phukan, and Hiren Bhattacharjya testify to the richness and diversity of this tradition. While this unit offers an overview of the major trends and figures, the terrain of modern Assamese poetry remains vast, with much scope for further and deeper exploration.

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Unit-3

Chandra Kanta Murasingh: Slumber

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Works of the Poet
- 3.4 Critical Reception
- 3.5 Context of the Poem
- 3.6 Reading the Poem “Slumber”
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 Model Questions
- 3.9 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to Chandra Kanta Murasingh, a prominent voice in contemporary Northeast Indian poetry. The unit will explore Murasingh’s personal background and how his work engages with regional identity, language, and the socio-political anxieties of Northeast India. After reading this unit, you should be able to-

- *understand* Murasingh’s poetic concerns and style,
- *identify* how Murasingh’s poetry relates to the wider corpus of Northeast Indian literature,
- *explore* the themes and stylistic features of Murasingh’s poetry,
- *discuss* how Murasingh’s work addresses issues of belonging and cultural identity,
- *appreciate* the relevance of Murasingh’s poetry in contemporary Indian literature.

3.2 Introduction

Chandra Kanta Murasingh was a celebrated contemporary poet from Tripura, Northeast India. Known for his evocative use of natural imagery and engagement with social concerns, Murasingh's poetry reflects the complexities of Northeast Indian life which is marked by cultural diversity, political tensions, and a search for rootedness. Born in 1957, Murasingh wrote prose, poems and drama in both Kokborok and Bengali languages. His poetry is deeply connected to the landscape and folklore of Tripura, and to the lived experiences of its people. In addition to being a poet, Murasingh has worked as an educator and has been an influential cultural figure in his region. He was the president of the Kokborok Sahitya Academy. He has also received the prestigious Bhasha Sanman award from Sahitya Akademi of New Delhi. Murasingh emerges as a significant voice in contemporary Kokborok literature, deeply rooted in the ethos of the Borok people of Tripura. His poetic vision is intimately connected to the land and culture of his community, which have long been subject to historical marginalization and cultural erasure. In the larger narrative of Tripura's complex history, Murasingh's work stands as a powerful articulation of the Borok people's identity, aspirations, and struggles. His creative expressions resonate with the collective memory of his people and reflect an engagement with the cultural heritage and social issues that shape their existence. Murasingh's poetry is often marked by a profound sense of rootedness, a recurring motif in the broader spectrum of Kokborok literary voices. This rootedness is not merely geographical but also cultural and emotional, reflecting the Borok community's enduring bond with their land and nature. His works exemplify what scholars have identified as the emergence of "little narratives" that challenge and resist the dominant historical and cultural narratives which have historically marginalised the Borok identity. His poems emerge

from a place of acute awareness of the historical injustices and cultural neglect experienced by his people.

In his influential essay “Her People and Her Past,” Murasingh expresses the anguish of the Borok community, particularly in how the Rajmala, the historical chronicle of Tripura, failed to represent the lived experiences of the common people. Murasingh laments that the Maharajas of the state, ensconced in regal splendour, felt ashamed to speak the Kokborok language of their subjects, further alienating themselves from the very people they ruled. This historical schism between the rulers and the ruled, as Murasingh poignantly articulates, has created a deep sense of cultural loss and identity crisis among the Boroks. His poetry, therefore, can be seen as an act of cultural reclamation.

Murasingh’s verses are imbued with a quiet defiance, challenging the imposed narratives that have sought to erase or diminish the Borok identity. In doing so, he aligns himself with other contemporary Borok poets like Shefali Debbarma, Shyamlal Debbarma, and Sudhanya Tripura, who use poetry to reaffirm their community’s connection to their land, culture, and language. His poems are not just lyrical expressions; they are acts of resistance, seeking to restore dignity to the Borok people’s stories and experiences. In the larger context of North-East Indian literature, Murasingh’s work resonates with the themes of identity, rootedness, and resistance that define the region’s literary output. His poetry shows the importance of oral traditions and folk narratives, which have long sustained the cultural life of the Borok people in the absence of formal written records. Murasingh ensures that the voices of his community are not only preserved but also celebrated in the contemporary literary landscape.

Stop to Consider

Kokborok Literature: Prominent writers

The chronicle of Rajmala was translated in Bengali in the 14th century AD under the instructions of king Dharma Manikya. After Rajmala it was only towards the end of the 19th century that attempts were made to work on writing the language Kokborok. The 20th century saw some remarkable development in creating Kokborok literature. When the Tripura Govt gave state recognition to the language in 1979, the language received much attention.

The following are some of the important writers of Kokborok literature of 20th century

- Sudhanwa Debbarma: “ Kwtal Kothoma” which is the first Kokborok magazine was published by him. He wrote novels such as *Chethuang*, *Hachuk Khurio*
- Nanda Kumar Deb Barman: wrote the novel *Rung*(2001), compilations of works as *Thungnuk Bwchap* (2015)
- Bikashrai Debbarma : Poetry collection “ Tutankhamun ni Pyramid” for which he received Doulat Ahmed Award in 2022
- Benichandra Jamatia: Padma Sri Awarded in 2020 for introducing the Baul singing tradition of West Bengal in Kokborok language.

3.3 Works of the Poet

Chandra Kanta Murasingh’s work captures the vibrant tapestry of Northeast Indian life. His poetry often bridges the personal with the collective, using nature and folklore as motifs to explore the human condition. Murasingh’s poems are lauded for their economy of language and the evocative power of images rooted in the landscape of Tripura. Some of his works include:

1: *Forest- 1987:* Murasingh poignantly captures the loss and alienation caused by conflict in the Borok homeland of Tripura and was translated by Bamapada Mukherjee and published in the year 2000. The poem begins with the nostalgic image of “the fragrance of flowery garlands” that once “haunted the seven hills,” evoking a sense of harmony and belonging in the natural world. Yet this harmony has been broken and the speaker laments that he can no longer reach the forest, missing the comforting sounds of the cock’s call and the deer’s bark. This absence signals a rupture between the speaker and his land, an estrangement rooted in political violence and displacement

The once-celebrated fragrance of madhavi flowers is replaced by the acrid smell of gunpowder, an explicit symbol of conflict and militarisation in Tripura. The poem thus documents not just ecological loss but also cultural and spiritual disintegration. It reflects the lived experience of the Borok people in the late 20th century, when insurgency and state violence reshaped their landscape and identity:

The hen in the forest now

Roams and clucks from noon to dusk.

The haunting *madhavi* fragrance escapes the rustle of spring air.

It is acrid with the smell of gunpowder. (7-10)

Through simple yet powerful imagery, Murasingh portrays the forest as both a literal and symbolic homeland, that is an essential part of Borok identity threatened by political upheaval and violence.

2. *The Stone Speaks in the Forest:* The poem intertwines myth and history that create a layered connection between memory and survival in the Borok homeland. It was translated by Udayan Ghosh and published in the year 2000. The poem begins with the image of a golden deer, symbolising innocence and natural beauty, chased

into the forest's amlaki grove, a tranquil scene soon disrupted by the arrival of the king. The king's foot pressing on the stone's forehead represents the violent weight of conquest and historical oppression. Although the stone remains silent, it carries this burden. It represents not just its own pain but also the collective suffering of the forest and its people. A man with a broken heart visits the stone and leaves behind his dreams and tears before rowing upstream, an image that suggests the Borok people's ongoing relationship with their land despite historical wounds. As life continues with water running and leaves quivering, Hachukrai, which is the name of a villager, drags his raft. The stone becomes an active voice in the forest, holding a bow and arrow in its hand:

Water runs, the *laidom* leaves quiver
Hachukrai drags his bamboo raft
There is a market downstream, on a sandy islet.
Wondering, who will respond now,
The stone speaks in the forest
Bow and arrow in hand. (18-23)

This final image is a powerful assertion of indigenous resistance and self-determination. Murasingh's poem transforms the stone into both witness and warrior, which is an emblem of the Borok people's spirit and their refusal to be silenced in the face of historical violence and cultural marginalisation.

3. *Of a Minister*: In the poem, the speaker expresses a frustration with his own limitations and a mockery of those in power. It was translated by Saroj Chaudhury and published in 2005. The poet's voice is longing for the apparent ease of expression and authority that ministers seem to have. The speaker wishes to escape the whirlwind of his own words and become someone who never seems to lack things to say. Historically, this poem resonates with Tripura's political reality marked by exclusion and the struggles of

indigenous communities who find themselves blocked by powerful voices that rarely represent them. It also reflects the divide between those who have access to many “roads” and the common people whose paths are consistently obstructed.

There are times when I find all roads blocked,
The threatening *Ker*-bows aimed from all sides.
At such times I wish I were a minister.
The ministers know and show a thousand roads.
They live on crossroads at a million junctures. (7-11)

The poem captures a deep sense of alienation and powerlessness the speaker’s own words are trapped within him while ministers have endless access to language and platforms. The natural imagery of crossroads and dried riverbeds suggests both stagnation and longing for connection to the land and people. Even as the speaker imagines the minister’s world of “a thousand roads” he realises that this is not fertile soil but only a facade of endless talk disconnected from reality. Murasingh’s poem thus becomes a critique of political privilege and an affirmation of the dignity and quiet wisdom of those whose words may be fewer but whose connection to the land is real and enduring.

4. *Oh, Poor Hachukrai*: The poem delivers a powerful critique of political hypocrisy and the tragic cost suffered by the indigenous Borok people. Hachukrai, a recurring symbolic figure in Murasingh’s poetry, represents the ordinary Borok person. He is rooted to the land, yet increasingly powerless. The poem opens with a dramatic image of a blind man delivering a passionate speech, theatrically performing love for the land by knocking his head on the ground and urging unity. This act is ironically empty, as it comes from someone who lacks true vision which symbolizes political leaders who speak of love for the soil but do not protect it. Hachukrai, in contrast, is portrayed as dispossessed and physically

weakened, having sold his land piece by piece to support the system that exploits him:

Hachukrai, how would you touch the soil
And swear by it?
You don't have an inch of land left,
All is lost bit by bit
In a distress sale to pay
For the cure of this man's myopic vision. (9-14)

His anaemia, dazed eyes, and faded smile reflect not just economic exhaustion but emotional and cultural erosion. The flag atop the tree, coloured by the blind, becomes the final metaphor for a nation built on the sacrifices of those who are never seen or acknowledged. The poem mourns the disempowerment of the indigenous while exposing the performative nationalism of political elites that makes it a poignant voice of resistance and sorrow.

SAQ

1. Discuss briefly about the growth of Kokborok literature. Discuss Chandra Kanta Murasingh's contributions to Kokborok literature

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.....

3.4 Critical Reception

Murasingh's poetry has been acclaimed for its lyrical beauty and social resonance. Scholars and critics of Northeast Indian literature praise his ability to weave regional concerns into a universal poetic language. His work is often seen as part of a larger movement of Northeast Indian writers who assert their cultural identity within the broader Indian literary canon. Murasingh's poems are included in anthologies of Northeast Indian writing and have been translated

into several Indian languages. Critics highlight how his work deals with the challenges of writing in English while retaining the musicality and spirit of his native Kokborok culture. Critics note that his poetry reveals a commitment to recording the agonies of life in contemporary Tripura, a land scarred by insurgency, ethnic conflict and military presence. He portrays vivid, lyrical imagery of forest life and tribal countryside, even as his work interweaves political violence. Murasingh is seen as a chronicler of Tripura's land and people, capturing the region's tones and tribulations in verse. His poems are steeped in local ritual and nature: for example, he often references forest elements such as birds, rice-wine, the madhavi flower as symbols of cultural rootedness. Arundhathi Subramaniam observes that his principal tool is "irony, which he deploys with a skill that can be both savage and understated". In one scathing verse "*Of a Minister*", he describes a politician as having "neither inside, nor outside... no air, no fertile soil," a line critics call "a brilliant example condemning the nihilism of those in power". In this way Murasingh's verse exemplifies the Northeast tendency to sink "roots into the own Past," making folklore and landscape to contemporary reality.

3.5 Context of the Poem

"Slumber" was written during a period of intense cultural reflection in Northeast India. The poem speaks to a sense of weariness of both personal and collective in a region dealing with political unrest and cultural fragmentation. Northeast India, comprising eight states, has a history of socio-political struggles, and poets like Murasingh have often used the motif of "sleep" to comment on a collective pause, a yearning for peace and renewal amid the noise of history.

Tripura witnessed a sharp demographic shift due to the influx of refugees from Bangladesh, formerly called East Pakistan, leading to the marginalization of the indigenous Tripuri population. This shift contributed to social and political unrest, the erosion of tribal culture, and rising tensions between communities. It was in this atmosphere of fragmentation and anxiety that Murasingh composed his poetry. *Slumber*, like much of his work, responds to this environment by offering a lyrical meditation on collective fatigue. The motif of “sleep” or “slumber” in the poem is not merely physical rest but a metaphor for a cultural and psychological withdrawal. It highlights a state in which people, overwhelmed by violence and uncertainty, seek temporary refuge in silence. At the same time, the poem reflects a deeper cultural yearning: a desire to reconnect with a more harmonious past, to preserve the integrity of indigenous life, and to awaken into a future free from turmoil. The reference to slumber thus resonates with both sorrow and subtle hope. In this sense, the poem reflects a broader tradition in Northeast Indian literature, where writers respond to socio-political instability not only with direct protest but also with poetic introspection.

SAQ

1. Discuss the cultural context of the poem “ Slumber”. Does the poem reflect on the poet’s response to contemporary reality in Tripura?

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3.6 Reading the Poem

The poem *Slumber* can be seen as a meditation on stillness and introspection. The poem is written in the first person that leads to an observational tone. The speaker is not a passive observer, but someone embedded within the landscape. The image of slumber becomes a powerful metaphor for both escape and resistance. It is a retreat from the turmoil of the world and a quiet assertion of the self's need for rest. This poem evokes a deep, dreamlike meditation on personal detachment, socio-political disillusionment, and the ironic comfort of sleep amid chaos. The speaker begins by comparing their state of sleep to innocence and love, describing it as being "like a child suckling, nestled at its mother's breast" and "like a tired face buried deep in the beloved's tresses." These lines root sleep in emotional and physical intimacy and portrays as a place of security and nurture. However, this calm is deceptive, the speaker's anxieties persist beneath the surface. When they confess:

Yet my thoughts, my anxieties haunt me even in slumber.
Now and here, like our blood and our indifference,
My sleep and myself run crimson through our hearts. (4-6)

It becomes clear that their sleep, although soothing, does not offer complete escape from the disturbances of consciousness. Blood evokes both violence and kinship, while indifference hints at a desensitized or fatigued society. By pairing them, Murasingh critiques not only external violence but also internal apathy. The poet implicates himself in this collective numbness, acknowledging that the personal and political are interconnected.

Our learned intelligentsia

Parrot the taught words from within the party-cage (7-8)

It criticizes the intellectual elite for blindly echoing ideological scripts rather than questioning or resisting authority. The speaker sees these figures as imprisoned by their own compliance, much like birds in a cage. The metaphor of sleep continues to evolve. Initially a sanctuary, it now becomes a symbol of detachment. When the speaker states, "My sleep sits on my head as a golden crown", it suggests that sleep has become a substitute for power. Instead of engaging with the real structures of power, the speaker finds a kind of royalty in disengagement, that elevates sleep to the level of coronation.

I traverse the hilly track.

The roadside shrubs lean onto the path.

The extremists tread and run over them.

Proud boots of security men also tread over them.

The corpses are carried along this road.

This dead face seems known.

Kutungla's wife had assuaged her hunger

With boiled weeds and a marsh frog. She died.

Watuirai passed away of enteritis or dysentery. (14-22)

The poem then shifts dramatically to a narrative of violence and poverty. The speaker walks a "hilly track," a metaphorical path that witnesses death and oppression. The "roadside shrubs" symbolize fragile lives, trampled by both "extremists" and "security men." This dual trampling suggests a lack of distinction between oppressor and supposed protector, both culpable in a cycle of brutality. Murasingh avoids glorifying either insurgents or the military. Both are described as trampling the path. It shows all agents of violence who have turned the land into a corridor of suffering. The poem's ethical stance is subtle but clear. The real victims are not those in power, but those who suffer quietly and die unnamed, like Kutungla's wife and Watuirai. The recurring deaths of characters such as "Kutungla's

wife," who ate "boiled weeds and a marsh frog," and "Watuirai," who succumbed to disease, reflect neglect and rural suffering. These people are not just casualties but symbols of forgotten humanity.

Am I really going someplace?

Or simply flooding the road with the glow of my crown?

Only my sleep knows. Sleep is my life. (35-37)

The question "Am I really going someplace?" is not just literal but deeply philosophical. It expresses a crisis of purpose and direction. The speaker challenges the assumption of movement or changes in their life. It shows the possibility that their journey is without destination or meaning. The poet uses rich imagery to suggest that rather than truly advancing, the speaker might only be projecting an illusion of purpose. The "glow of my crown" refers back to an earlier metaphor in the poem where sleep sits "as a golden crown" on the speaker's head. Here, that crown symbolizes not power in the conventional sense, but the quiet authority of withdrawal. It hints that the speaker's path is illuminated only by the aura of their sleep-induced passivity, and not by any real progress. Sleep, which began in the poem as a comforting presence, is now fully embraced as the speaker's defining reality. The phrase "only my sleep knows" suggests that the truth of their condition lies buried in unconsciousness or detachment. It reveals that sleep that is a symbolic of withdrawal, and perhaps resistance has become the speaker's chosen existence.

In the final stanza, social reactions to the speaker's sleep are detailed:

My father does not approve this sleep of mine.

My mother gets irritated, my wife gets angry.

Yet there are some, who join the social festivals in earnest,

Casting a furtive look at my sleep and me. (36-39)

The speaker's sleep represents not only personal withdrawal but also a silent protest against the political and social chaos around him. His family's disapproval reflects traditional expectations in a society that values active participation, whether in work, politics, or family life. At the same time, the community continues to take part in social gatherings and violent spectacles like cockfights, revealing how normalized such brutality has become. They laugh under the stars and earn money in harsh ways, surviving in a world where death and conflict are routine. Yet their furtive glances toward the speaker show a deeper unrest. In this historical setting, marked by unrest and repression, the speaker's sleep becomes symbolic. It is a rejection of both state and rebel violence. It is a refusal to be part of the loud, destructive systems that surround him. The final image of sleep as a loving presence shows how the speaker finds freedom and joy in detachment. In a place where life is reduced to survival and slogans, his silent retreat becomes a powerful act. Sleep gives him peace in a world torn by fear and control.

3.7 Summing Up

Chandra Kanta Murasingh's "Slumber" is a delicate yet profound poem that uses the metaphor of sleep to explore human vulnerability and resilience. Through the quietness of slumber, Murasingh speaks to a region's collective sigh a brief pause in a long journey. His poetry, rooted in the landscape and folklore of Northeast India, adds a unique voice to Indian English poetry, bridging the personal and the political. In a world marked by noise and conflict, Murasingh's "Slumber" offers a moment of reflection and a reminder of the restorative power of dreams.

3.8 Model Questions

1. How does Murasingh's work contribute to the representation of Northeast Indian identity in Indian English literature?
2. In what ways does the imagery of nature in "Slumber" speak to the region's cultural and ecological heritage?
3. Discuss the interplay of personal and collective consciousness in Murasingh's poetry.
4. Compare the themes in "Slumber" with those of other poets from Northeast India, such as Mamang Dai or Temsula Ao.
5. How does Murasingh's choice of English as a medium influence the style and reach of his poetry?

3.9 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit-4

Mona Zote's: "What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril"

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 "What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril": The Poem
- 4.4 "What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril": An Overview
 - 4.4.1 Setting and Background of the Poem
 - 4.4.2 Analysis of the Poem
- 4.5 Literary Features
 - 4.5.1 Poetic Devices
 - 4.5.2 Symbols
 - 4.5.3 Form, Meter, and Rhyme
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *analyze* the poem critically,
- *understand* the history of the poem,
- *understand* the structure of the composition,
- *know* the poetic devices and symbolism used.

4.2 Introduction

Mona Zote, born in 1973 in Patna, Bihar, is a distinguished Indian poet whose work has significantly contributed to contemporary literature from Northeast India. Although born outside Mizoram, she relocated to Aizawl in her twenties, where she currently resides and

works. Zote is known for her dual identity as a government employee and a poet, often referring to herself as a “poet disguised as a government employee.”

Zote’s upbringing in Bihar, influenced by her father’s career in the Indian Administrative Service, exposed her to diverse cultural and linguistic environments. This early exposure likely informed her nuanced understanding of identity and belonging, themes prevalent in her poetry. Her move to Mizoram in her twenties marked a significant turn in her life, immersing her in the socio-political landscape of the Northeast, which profoundly influences her literary work.

Professionally, Zote serves in the Income Tax Department of the Government of Mizoram. She has noted that her bureaucratic role, requiring precision and logic, contrasts with the creative freedom of poetry. In an interview, she remarked that while her job demands exactness, it has inadvertently shaped her thinking and perception, influencing her poetic expression.

Zote writes primarily in English and is recognized for her distinctive poetic voice that blends formal and colloquial registers. Her poetry is characterized by unsentimental and disquieting imagery, often employing a fragmentary and non-linear style. She has published in various journals, including *Indian Literature* and *Carapace*, and her work features in anthologies like *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* and the *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*.

Some of her notable poems include “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril,” “An Impression of Being Alive,” and “Rez.” In “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril,” Zote explores the role of poetry amid violence and turmoil, asserting that poetry must be raw and visceral, akin to “a side of beef.” Her poem “Rez” delves into

themes of identity and cultural displacement, reflecting on life in a reservation and the complexities of tribal heritage. Zote has mentioned that “Rez” was inspired by a news item about a shootout on a Native American reservation, drawing parallels between the experiences of indigenous communities globally.

While Zote work has garnered critical acclaim and is widely studied in the context of Northeast Indian literature. Her poetry offers a poignant commentary on the socio-political issues of the region, including insurgency, cultural erosion, and the complexities of identity. Critics have noted her ability to capture the spiritual aridity and paralysis of initiative in her environment, oscillating between rage, ironic resignation, and grim despair.

Zote's contribution to literature extends beyond her poetry. She has participated in literary festivals and readings, sharing her insights on writing and the role of poetry in society. Her work is included in academic discussions and anthologies, highlighting her influence on contemporary Indian poetry. In interviews, Zote has expressed that writing is an effort to make sense of life's absurdities and to maintain sanity. She describes the process of writing as attempting to piece together the shapes of her environment, akin to standing too close to a stained glass window, where one glimpses colors and suggestions of forms without seeing the complete picture.

Zote's poetry often reflects her Mizo identity and experiences as a woman, though she acknowledges that these aspects are inseparable at the moment and may evolve over time. Her work challenges societal norms and offers a voice to the complexities of life in Mizoram and the broader Northeast region. She stands as a significant figure in Indian English poetry, offering a unique perspective shaped by her experiences in Mizoram and her role as a government employee. Her poetry, marked by its raw imagery and

exploration of identity, continues to resonate with readers and contributes to the rich tapestry of Northeast Indian literature.

4.3 “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril”: The Poem

What should poetry mean to a woman in the hills
as she sits one long sloping summer evening
in Patria, Aizawl, her head crammed with contrary winds,
pistolling the clever stars that seem to say:
Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

So what if Ernestina is not a name at all,
not even a corruption, less than a monument. She will sit
pulling on one thin cigarillo after another, will lift her teacup
in friendly greeting to the hills and loquacious stars
and the music will comb on through her hair,
telling her: *Poetry must be raw like a side of beef,
should drip blood, remind you of sweat
and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch
and the sudden bullet to the head.*

The sudden bullet in the head. Thus she sits, calmly gathered.

The lizard in her blinks and thinks. She will answer:
*The dog was mad that bit me. Later, they cut out my third eye
and left it in a jar on a hospital shelf. That was when the drums
began.*

*Since then I have met the patron saint of sots and cirrhosis who used
to stand
in every corner until the police chased her down. She jumped into a
taxi.*

*Now I have turned into the girl with the black guitar
and it was the dog who died. Such is blood.*

The rustle of Ernestina's skirt will not reveal the sinful vine
or the cicada crumbling to a pair of wings at her feet.
She will smile and say: *I like a land where babies
are ripped out of their graves, where the church
leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad
marriages
quite out of proportion to the current population, and your
neighbour
is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint
and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is
kept
by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous
hands.*
Religion has made drunks of us all. The old goat bleats.
We are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land. Stars, be silent.
Let Ernestina speak.

So what if the roses are in disarray? She will rise
with a look of terror too real to be comical.
The conspiracy in the greenhouse the committee of good women
They have marked her down
They are coming the dead dogs the yellow popes
They are coming the choristers of stone
We have been bombed silly out of our minds.

Waiter, bring me something cold and hard to drink.
Somewhere there is a desert waiting for me
and someday I will walk into it.

4.4 “What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril”: An Overview

4.4.1 Setting and Background of the Poem

The poem is set in Aizawl, Mizoram, a region troubled by insurgency and state violence for decades. In the poem, Ernestina’s “peril” symbolizes the enduring psychological and societal scars left by years of conflict. Despite the cessation of overt violence, the memories and consequences of the insurgency continue to affect individuals and communities. Ernestina’s contemplation of poetry reflects a search for meaning and solace in a landscape still haunted by its past. The poem, therefore, is an instrument of both reflection and resistance. It is a mirror to the harsh realities of Mizoram’s history and a form of resistance against the erasure of personal and collective narratives. Through Ernestina’s introspection, the poem explores the power of poetry to confront trauma, preserve memory, and foster resilience in the face of adversity.

Stop to Consider

Mizoram’s modern history is deeply influenced by the Mautam famine of 1959, caused by the cyclical flowering of bamboo, which led to a surge in the rat population and subsequent crop destruction. The Indian government’s inadequate response to this crisis fueled discontent, leading to the formation of the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1961. The MNF initiated an armed uprising in 1966, seeking independence from India. This insurgency persisted for two decades, culminating in the Mizoram Peace Accord of 1986, which granted Mizoram statehood and significant autonomy under Article 371(G) of the Indian Constitution.

4.4.2 Analysis of the Poem

Mona Zote's "What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril" is a densely layered poem that resists linear interpretation. It unfolds through a series of surreal, disjointed images and voices, reflecting the internal and external turmoil of its central figure, Ernestina. The poem is set in Aizawl, Mizoram, a region marked by political unrest and cultural complexities, which permeate the poem's atmosphere.

Lines 1–5:

"What should poetry mean to a woman in the hills / as she sits one long sloping summer evening / in Patria, Aizawl, her head crammed with contrary winds, / pistolling the clever stars that seem to say: / *Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.*"

The poem opens with a rhetorical question, situating Ernestina in the hills of Aizawl. The "contrary winds" suggest internal conflict or external pressures, while "pistolling the clever stars" introduces a violent, almost combative relationship with the cosmos. The stars' admonition—"Ignoring the problem will not make it go away"—serves as a thematic anchor, highlighting the necessity of confronting issues directly.

Lines 6–10:

"So what if Ernestina is not a name at all, / not even a corruption, less than a monument. She will sit / pulling on one thin cigarillo after another, will lift her teacup / in friendly greeting to the hills and loquacious stars / and the music will comb on through her hair,"

Here, Ernestina's identity is called into question — "not a name at all" — implying a loss or absence of self. Her actions — smoking, lifting a teacup — are habitual, almost ritualistic, suggesting a coping mechanism. The "loquacious stars" continue the motif of a

communicative universe, while “the music will comb on through her hair” introduces a sensory, almost tactile, experience of sound.

Lines 11–14:

“telling her: *Poetry must be raw like a side of beef, / should drip blood, remind you of sweat / and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch / and the sudden bullet to the head.*”

The poem shifts to a didactic tone, prescribing what poetry “must be.” The imagery is visceral — “raw like a side of beef,” “drip blood,” “dusty slaughter” — evoking the physicality of violence and mortality. The “epidermal crunch” and “sudden bullet to the head” further emphasize the brutal, corporeal nature of true poetic expression.

Lines 15–18:

“The sudden bullet in the head. Thus she sits, calmly gathered. / The lizard in her blinks and thinks. She will answer: / *The dog was mad that bit me. Later, they cut out my third eye / and left it in a jar on a hospital shelf. / That was when the drums began.*”

The repetition of “sudden bullet” underscores its significance. Ernestina is “calmly gathered,” suggesting composure amidst chaos. The “lizard in her” introduces a primal, instinctual aspect of her psyche. Her statement about the “mad dog” and the removal of her “third eye” alludes to trauma and the loss of spiritual or intuitive insight. The “drums” signify the onset of turmoil or perhaps a call to action.

Lines 19–22:

“*Since then I have met the patron saint of sots and cirrhosis who used to stand / in every corner until the police chased her down. She jumped into a taxi. / Now I have turned into the girl with the black guitar / and it was the dog who died. Such is blood.*”

The “patron saint of sots and cirrhosis” personifies addiction and societal decay, and her evasion of the police suggests suppression of these issues. Ernestina’s transformation into “the girl with the black guitar” indicates a shift in identity, possibly embracing a rebellious or artistic persona. The final line, “Such is blood,” ties back to earlier imagery, reinforcing themes of violence and mortality.

Lines 23–26:

“The rustle of Ernestina’s skirt will not reveal the sinful vine / or the cicada crumbling to a pair of wings at her feet. / She will smile and say: *I like a land where babies / are ripped out of their graves, where the church*”

The “rustle of Ernestina’s skirt” suggests hidden truths or suppressed narratives. The “sinful vine” and “cicada crumbling” evoke decay and transformation. Her statement about liking a land with such grotesque imagery is deeply ironic, critiquing societal and religious institutions that perpetuate suffering.

Lines 27–30:

“leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad marriages / quite out of proportion to the current population, and your neighbour / is kidnapped by demons and the young wither without complaint / and pious women know the sexual ecstasy of dance and peace is kept”

These lines continue the critique, highlighting the consequences of religious and societal hypocrisy. The mention of “illegitimate children,” “bad marriages,” and “kidnapped by demons” paints a picture of a community plagued by dysfunction and apathy. The juxtaposition of “pious women” experiencing “sexual ecstasy of dance” suggests a complex interplay between repression and liberation.

Lines 31–34:

“by short men with a Bible and five big knuckles on their righteous hands. / Religion has made drunks of us all. The old goat bleats. / We are killing ourselves. I like an incestuous land. Stars, be silent. / Let Ernestina speak.”

The “short men with a Bible” symbolize authoritarian figures enforcing moral codes through violence. The assertion that “Religion has made drunks of us all” critiques the numbing effect of dogma. The “old goat” could represent a sacrificial figure or a symbol of stubbornness. The plea for the stars to be silent so Ernestina can speak emphasizes the importance of her voice amidst the chaos.

Lines 35–38:

“So what if the roses are in disarray? She will rise / with a look of terror too real to be comical. / The conspiracy in the greenhouse the committee of good women / They have marked her down”

The “roses in disarray” suggest a loss of beauty or order. Ernestina’s “look of terror” is genuine, not exaggerated. The “conspiracy in the greenhouse” and “committee of good women” imply societal judgment and ostracization. “They have marked her down” indicates that she has been targeted or condemned.

Lines 39–41:

“They are coming the dead dogs the yellow popes / They are coming the choristers of stone / We have been bombed silly out of our minds.”

The repetition of “They are coming” creates a sense of impending doom. “Dead dogs,” “yellow popes,” and “choristers of stone” are surreal images, possibly representing oppressive forces or haunting memories. The final line conveys a collective trauma, suggesting

that the community has been mentally overwhelmed by violence and catastrophe.

Lines 42–44:

“Waiter, bring me something cold and hard to drink. / Somewhere there is a desert waiting for me / and someday I will walk into it.”

The request for a “cold and hard” drink implies a desire for numbness or escape. The “desert” symbolizes desolation or a place of exile, and Ernestina’s intention to “walk into it” suggests a final act of departure or surrender.

Zote’s poem is a powerful exploration of identity, trauma, and resistance, using vivid and often unsettling imagery to convey the psychological landscape of its protagonist. Ernestina emerges as a complex figure, embodying both vulnerability and defiance in the face of societal and existential challenges.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Mona Zote redefine the concept of poetry through the line “Poetry must be raw like a side of beef”? (100-200 words)
2. How does the poem critique religious institutions, particularly through the line “Religion has made drunks of us all”? (100-200 words)
3. How does the poem reflect the socio-political realities of Northeast India, especially in the context of insurgency and state violence? (100-200 words)
4. What is the significance of the poem’s closing lines, particularly the desire for “something cold and hard to drink” and the mention of a waiting desert? (100-200 words)

4.5 Literary Features

4.5.1 Poetic Devices

- **Imagery:** Zote employs vivid and often unsettling imagery to evoke the visceral nature of poetry and the experiences it encapsulates. The line, “Poetry must be raw like a side of beef, / should drip blood, remind you of sweat / and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch / and the sudden bullet to the head,” uses stark, corporeal images to define poetry as something intensely physical and brutal. This imagery serves to challenge sanitized notions of poetry, instead presenting it as an embodiment of raw human experience and suffering. The sensory details — blood, sweat, slaughter — immerse the reader in a world where poetry is inseparable from the corporeal and the violent.
- **Personification:** Personification is utilized to imbue abstract concepts and inanimate objects with human qualities, thereby intensifying their impact. For instance, “the music will comb on through her hair,” attributes a gentle, human action to music, suggesting a soothing yet invasive presence. Similarly, “the lizard in her blinks and thinks,” personifies an internal aspect of Ernestina, perhaps symbolizing a primal or instinctual part of her psyche that observes and contemplates her reality. These personifications deepen the reader’s engagement with Ernestina’s internal world, making abstract experiences more tangible.
- **Allusion:** Zote’s poem is rich with allusions that provide depth and context. The reference to “the patron saint of sots and cirrhosis” alludes to figures associated with alcoholism and its consequences, possibly critiquing societal or religious hypocrisy. Furthermore, the line “Religion has made drunks of us all” serves as a scathing commentary on the role of organized

religion in society, suggesting that it has led people astray or numbed them to reality. These allusions function to critique societal structures and highlight the complexities of cultural identity.

- **Symbolism:** Symbolism is prevalent throughout the poem, with objects and actions representing broader themes. The “third eye” that was “cut out” and left “in a jar on a hospital shelf” symbolizes the loss of insight, intuition, or spiritual vision, possibly due to societal oppression or trauma. The “black guitar” Ernestina turns into may symbolize a voice of resistance or a means of expression amidst chaos. These symbols enrich the narrative, offering layers of meaning that reflect the protagonist’s internal and external struggles.
- **Irony:** Irony is employed to underscore contradictions and provoke critical reflection. When Ernestina says, “I like a land where babies / are ripped out of their graves,” the grotesque imagery juxtaposed with the phrase “I like” creates a jarring effect, highlighting the absurdity and horror of such a reality. This use of irony serves to criticize societal apathy and the normalization of violence, compelling the reader to question the status quo.
- **Repetition:** Repetition is used to emphasize key themes and create rhythm. The phrase “The sudden bullet in the head” is repeated, reinforcing the abruptness and violence associated with both literal and metaphorical assaults. This repetition mirrors the inescapable nature of trauma and the cyclical patterns of violence, embedding these themes deeply into the reader’s consciousness.
- **Enjambment:** Zote utilizes enjambment to maintain the flow of thought and reflect the continuous, often overwhelming nature

of Ernestina's experiences. For example, the lines: "She will smile and say: I like a land where babies / are ripped out of their graves, where the church / leads to practical results like illegitimate children and bad marriages." Here, the lack of punctuation at line breaks propels the reader forward, mirroring the relentless progression of societal decay and personal turmoil. This technique effectively conveys the unceasing and interconnected challenges faced by the protagonist.

4.5.2 Symbols

- **Raw Meat and the Bullet to the Head:** The poem asserts that "Poetry must be raw like a side of beef, / should drip blood, remind you of sweat / and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch / and the sudden bullet to the head." This visceral imagery equates poetry with raw meat and violence, suggesting that poetry should confront harsh realities head-on. The "side of beef" symbolizes unfiltered truth, while the "bullet to the head" represents sudden, brutal awareness. Together, they emphasize that poetry should not shy away from depicting the raw and painful aspects of life.
- **The Third Eye in a Jar:** The line "Later, they cut out my third eye / and left it in a jar on a hospital shelf" introduces the "third eye" as a symbol of intuition and deeper perception. Its removal and preservation in a jar suggest a loss or suppression of insight and spiritual vision. This could reflect societal or institutional forces that stifle individual awareness and the ability to perceive beyond the surface.
- **The Girl with the Black Guitar:** The transformation into "the girl with the black guitar" signifies a shift in identity and perhaps a reclaiming of voice through art. The black guitar may

symbolize mourning or resistance, and becoming this figure could represent embracing a new, perhaps rebellious, persona that challenges previous constraints. This metamorphosis underscores themes of resilience and the power of self-expression.

- **The Patron Saint of Sots and Cirrhosis:** Meeting “the patron saint of sots and cirrhosis” introduces a figure embodying addiction and decay. This character could symbolize the destructive escapism found in substances, reflecting societal neglect or personal despair. The saint’s presence in every corner and subsequent disappearance suggests the pervasive yet transient nature of such coping mechanisms.
- **The Cicada Crumbling to Wings:** The image of “the cicada crumbling to a pair of wings at her feet” evokes transformation and the ephemeral nature of existence. Cicadas are often associated with rebirth due to their life cycles. Here, the crumbling suggests a shedding of the old self, leaving behind only the potential for flight or freedom, symbolized by the wings. This could represent the remnants of past identities or experiences that have been outgrown.

4.5.3 Form, Meter and Rhyme

- **Form**

Zote employs free verse, eschewing traditional structures like fixed stanza lengths or consistent line counts. This open form mirrors the poem’s thematic focus on chaos and disruption. The poem unfolds in a series of vivid, fragmented images and narratives, reflecting Ernestina’s tumultuous psyche and the disordered world she inhabits. The absence of a rigid structure allows Zote to navigate seamlessly between surreal imagery and stark realism, enhancing

the poem's emotional resonance. The poem's layout also contributes to its form. Lines vary in length, and stanzas shift unpredictably, creating a visual representation of instability. This structural fluidity aligns with the poem's exploration of a world where conventional boundaries — between sanity and madness, reality and hallucination — are blurred.

- **Meter**

In keeping with its free verse form, the poem lacks a consistent meter. Zote utilizes variable rhythms to reflect the poem's emotional landscape. Some lines are terse and abrupt, such as "The sudden bullet in the head," conveying shock and immediacy. Others are more languid and descriptive, like "pulling on one thin cigarillo after another," evoking a sense of weariness and contemplation. This fluctuating rhythm mirrors Ernestina's mental state, oscillating between moments of clarity and confusion. The irregular meter also reflects the poem's thematic concerns with disorder and fragmentation, reinforcing the sense of a world out of sync.

- **Rhyme**

Zote's poem is characterized by its lack of a formal rhyme scheme, a hallmark of free verse. This absence of rhyme contributes to the poem's raw and unfiltered tone, aligning with its themes of violence and disarray. However, Zote occasionally employs internal rhymes and alliteration to create subtle musicality and emphasis. For instance, the line "telling her: Poetry must be raw like a side of beef" uses the repetition of the 'r' sound in "raw" and "beef" to underscore the poem's visceral imagery. Such devices enhance the poem's sonic texture without imposing a rigid rhyme structure, allowing for a more organic and expressive articulation of its themes.

SAQ

1. What is the significance of the recurring imagery of violence and decay, such as “the sudden bullet to the head” and “babies are ripped out of their graves”? (100-200 words)

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2. How does Zote use surreal and dream-like elements to convey the psychological impact of living in a conflict zone? (100-200 words)

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3. In what ways does the character of Ernestina serve as a symbol for women in patriarchal and conflict-affected societies? (100-200 words)

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4.6 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Mona Zote and her poem “What Poetry means to Ernestina in Peril.” For further reading, refer to the section below.

4.7 References and Suggested Readings

- Biswas, Debajyoti and Pratyusha Pramanik. “Resistance and Ungendering: Poetry of Mona Zote and Monalisa Changkija.” *Rupkatha Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, April-June 2022, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne08>
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Unit-5

Anubhav Tulasi: “It’s Been Quite Awhile Vincent,” “Post-Mortem”

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Works of the Poet
- 5.4 Critical Reception
- 5.5 Context of the Poems
- 5.6 Reading the Poem “It’s Been Quite Awhile Vincent,” “Post-Mortem”
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 Model Questions
- 5.9 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

The aim of this unit is to introduce you to Anubhav Tulasi. He is one of the most powerful voices in Assamese poetry. This unit includes his background and also looks at how his poems speak about society, politics, and human pain. After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- *understand* the social and political world of his poems,
- *explore* the major themes and images in his poetry,
- *look* closely at his use of surreal language and symbols,
- *learn* about his place in Assamese and Indian literature,
- *analyse* how his poetry matters in contemporary world.

5.2 Introduction

Anubhav Tulasi was born in 1958. He is a major name in Assamese literature. His poems speak about fear, violence, silence, and memory. He writes with great care and deep feeling. He is also a literary translator and has translated poets like Anna Akhmatova. His poetry collections include *Naazmaa*, *Jalamagna Drishyaavali*, *JuiChor*, *Kaabyapith*, *Matibhasha*, and many more. Anubhav Tulasi was born in 1960 in the village of Tulasimukh, located in the Nagaon district of central Assam. He received his early education at No 51 Lower Primary School and later attended Madhab Das High School. He pursued higher studies at Cotton College and Gauhati University. Tulasi worked as a faculty member teaching English literature at SBMS College in Sualkuchi, Kamrup district. His poetry is included in the syllabi of select Indian universities and has been widely anthologized by major publishers such as Oxford University Press, Penguin India, the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters), and the National Book Trust. His work has also been translated into several Indian and international languages, including Spanish, French, Swedish, Hungarian, Uzbek, and English. Tulasi grew up in a region filled with political unrest. His poetry does not ignore this. He does not write directly about war and violence. But these ideas are hidden in the images and moods of his poems. He writes about loss and pain, but he also writes about beauty. His poems feel both real and dreamlike. Tulasi believes that poetry has a duty, he thinks it should ask hard questions. His poems do not give easy answers, but they help us see the world more clearly. He writes to remember those who are gone. He writes to remind us of what we have lost. Tulasi is not only a poet of sorrow. He is a poet of honesty and his poems do not try to heal pain with lies. Instead, they hold the pain and speak it. This is what makes his poetry powerful. In one of his interviews , Anubhav Tulasi

mentioned about his pseudonym Tulasi where he said that he took the name for writing 'Nazma'. He was inspired by Pablo Neruda and other Urdu poets. He belonged to a place called Tulasimukh. Hence people called him Tulasi. The same name was validated later. He died in Guwahati on 1st July, 2025 after prolonged illness.

Anubhav Tulasi is an important voice in contemporary Assamese literature. His early life was shaped by the cultural and social environment of Assam. Growing up in this rich heritage influenced his poetic sensibility. Tulasi's intellectual curiosity led him to explore various literary traditions and languages. He developed a keen interest in poetry, translation, and social issues. His engagement with Assamese culture and global literature helped him form a unique poetic voice. Tulasi's poetry often reflects the struggles and hopes of ordinary people. His writings engage deeply with the political and social realities of Assam. He is not only a poet but also a translator, bringing important global poetic works into Assamese. This work connects Assamese literature with wider world literatures and expands its horizons.

5.3 Works of the Poet

Anubhav Tulasi's poetry is celebrated for its emotional resonance and deep connection to cultural and social realities. Major themes throughout his work include the intimate exploration of identity, the vivid portrayal of nature and rural life, the spiritual and philosophical quest, and a strong commitment to the Assamese language and heritage. His poetry reflects a sensitive awareness of both personal and collective struggles, blending lyrical beauty with social consciousness. Anubhav Tulasi mentioned that he was motivated by Western writers such as Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky, Anna Akhmatova, William Shakespeare, Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot, W

B. Yeats and many others. Among Indian writers, he was inspired by Srimanta Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Premchand, Kabir, Ghalib, Rabindranath Tagore, Navakanta Barua, Ajit Baruah, Nilamani Phukan, Mahim Borah, Saurav Kumar Chaliha and his contemporary writers.

Some of his notable works include:

1. The Pact: This poem explores freedom through release from a cosmic promise. The speaker reflects on a “bond signed with the sun” that has expired, declaring “I am free” even as he acknowledges that freedom itself now eludes him. The tone feels like a meditation on death and destiny mixed with a rebellious pride in ultimate escape from earthly ties. This poem was translated by Krishna Dulal Barua. Tulasi uses extended metaphors and vivid imagery. The opening lines immediately establish a sense of finality:

The term of my pact
Signed with the sun
Is over (1-3)

It conveys a decisive moment where the ending of an agreement that once perhaps defined existence or purpose. The sun, often a symbol of life, clarity, and temporal continuity, becomes in this poem an expired force. The breaking of the pact is not dramatic but existential, suggesting a passage into a new state of being, one where even freedom itself becomes irrelevant: “Even freedom can’t reach me now.” This radical detachment sets the tone for the rest of the poem. The speaker announces a complete withdrawal, a state beyond accessibility. Even intimate relationships are rendered obsolete.

In this life
You too can’t reach me

I can be reached only by a hook.

To be a hook

You've to peg out and gyrate

On a phantom-wheel. (6-11)

It expresses a refusal or impossibility of connection, hinting at both personal estrangement and a metaphysical transcendence. The only thing that can reach him is a "hook", a violent, unnatural intervention. Tulasi employs folkloric and mythic imagery. The phantom-wheel evokes traditional images of fate or karmic cycles, often associated with suffering, rebirth, and cosmic judgment.

In the hearth of Hades I'll warm myself

Cremate the hook with its entire lineage.

The hook-burning flames shall extinguish

In your eyes. (15-18)

Hades is a figure from ancient Greek mythology, known as the god of the underworld. He is one of the three major Olympian brothers, alongside Zeus, the god of the sky, and Poseidon, the god of the sea. After the defeat of the Titans, the three brothers divided the world among themselves, and Hades was given dominion over the realm of the dead. Instead of seeking solace in life or love, the speaker finds a strange sense of home in the realm of death and detachment. This introspective poem exemplifies Tulasi's fusion of personal feeling with Assamese mythic culture. The local cosmology (sun) and natural imagery (stars, fire) reflect his nature-rooted sensibility.

2. **Freedom:** Anubhav Tulasi's poem "Freedom" offers a deeply reflective and ironic take on the concept of liberty, using the allegorical figures of the flag and the wind to question whether freedom is a lived reality or a manipulated symbol. It was translated by NirendraNathThakuria. At first glance, the poem appears to be light-hearted, even playful. The opening lines:

The wind is jesting
The fluttering flag
is guffawing
and guffawing (1-4)

gives the impression of a carefree atmosphere, filled with laughter and movement. The flag and the wind are animated, almost like two old companions teasing one another. But this seemingly jovial tone gradually peels back to reveal something more unsettling and complex. This moment of friendship is quickly shadowed by a deeper philosophical question that the wind throws back:

Those who have flown balloons
and set pigeons free
haven't they unfurled you
in the name of freedom?
Have they unfurled you
or tethered you? (15-20)

These lines are the heart of the poem. They challenge the very function of the flag as a symbol of liberty, asking whether this symbol, often used in ceremonies, political events, and national celebrations, is truly an emblem of emancipation or merely a decorative mask that conceals deeper forms of control. By referencing common metaphors of freedom like flying balloons, releasing pigeons, the poem draws attention to how freedom is often ritualized, transformed into a spectacle. The flag, unfurled in such moments, is traditionally seen as a proud symbol of sovereignty and rights. Yet Tulasi subverts that meaning, suggesting that what is presented as liberation may actually serve to bind, restrict, or manipulate and the symbol itself might be “tethered” rather than free. The repetition of the word “guffawing” throughout the poem intensifies the sense of mockery, hinting that the flag and the wind are perhaps laughing not out of joy, but out of bitter awareness of

how the idea of freedom is exploited. The poem reaches a powerful emotional and intellectual crescendo in its final lines:

For the next ten minutes
both the wind and the flag
kept silent. (21-23)

This silence is not empty; it is loaded with the weight of what cannot be easily said. It is as if the wind and the flag, once symbols of natural force and national pride, are now stunned into contemplation. Their silence stands as a metaphor for collective complicity, confusion, or helplessness in the face of abstract freedoms that fail to materialize in practice. In a world where slogans, emblems, and rituals often replace real action, Tulasi's poem confronts us with a disturbing question: Is the freedom we claim to celebrate truly ours, or is it a performance designed to keep us content while systems of control continue beneath the surface? Thus, "Freedom" may appear simple in its language and structure, but it carries a profound critique of political and ideological manipulation. It echoes the disillusionment felt by those who have seen the gap between the rhetoric of liberty and its lived experience. With sparse yet potent imagery and irony, Tulasi deconstructs the false security of nationalistic pride and exposes the symbolic hollowness behind much of what is paraded as freedom

3. **Oh Youth:** The poem was translated by NirendraNathThakuria. It offers a reflection on the place of young idealists in a rapidly changing and often indifferent world. The poem contrasts the image of youth standing alone on a footbridge with the bustling, impatient environment symbolized by Las Vegas, a city known for its speed, spectacle, and commercialism.

What are you doing on the footbridge
Nobody can afford to wait at Las Vegas

Nobody has any spare time to eye you
You are standing at the same spot
contrary to the common character of Las Vega (2-6)

This setting represents the modern world's overwhelming focus on material success and entertainment, where people rarely pause to notice or appreciate sincere artistic expression or idealistic voices. The youth, who plays the guitar and sings despite the lack of listeners, symbolizes those who persist in their creative and hopeful endeavors even when society seems dismissive or inattentive. Throughout the poem, Tulasi captures the sense of isolation and struggle that young people often face when their values or dreams do not align with the dominant culture. The act of playing music and singing becomes a metaphor for the persistence of hope and the desire to communicate deeper truths, even when the audience is indifferent.

Today while I was coming
across the valley of death
you were on my mind (14-16)

The poet's mention of crossing a "valley of death" while thinking of the youth highlights the harsh realities and crises of life, suggesting that despite the challenges, the presence of youthful hope provides a vital source of strength and inspiration. In a broader social context, "Oh Youth" resonates with the feelings of many young people, particularly in the context of post-liberalization India, where rapid economic growth and consumerism often overshadow political idealism, artistic expression, and social consciousness. The poem acknowledges that while society may deny young people the recognition they deserve, their quiet acts of creativity and resistance hold the power to "shed light on earth." This message encourages the recognition of youth not merely as passive recipients of culture but as active agents capable of inspiring change and offering new

perspectives in a world that frequently prioritizes speed and spectacle over substance and reflection.

4. **Bow- Asana:** It was translated in English by Krishna Dulal Barua. The poem dramatizes a confrontation at night when three men creep onto an ice bed under glaring halogen lights in order to steal fish. Despite their attempt to blend into the darkness, they are illuminated in every sense, physically by artificial lights and morally under the watchful eye of God who remains awake even after the late-night Rath Yatra.

Jagannatha's RathJatra had ended very late
Tossing and turning about
Time crept
Just then a mild rustle
Just then a faint tinkle
A bid to open a drum-lid
On the ice-bed the fishes too
Missed their sleep (10-17)

The fish lie on the ice unable to sleep as if they too sense impending guilt and danger, turning the entire scene into a living tribunal where man, nature and the divine bear witness together. When one of the intruder's trips, his stumble becomes symbolic of a deeper moral misstep. At that moment divine justice intervenes, and God seizes him with unerring force. His accomplices immediately betray him, binding his limbs in a representation of human violence filling the gap where divine judgment has already acted. The fish themselves mock him, daring him to consume them raw and fresh, in a chilling reversal where the hunter becomes hunted. As blood seeps out, the fish feast on it and renew their vitality. It shows a savage transformation in which crime becomes sacrifice. With dawn breaking, the clamorous sounds that fill the air blur the boundary between nature's awakening and men discovering the carnage,

illuminating the poem's exploration of revelation and consequence. Finally, when the authorities arrive, they find the fallen man in the posture of bow asana, a yogic pose of humility and surrender, a powerful symbol of his submission not just to human law but to cosmic order. The poem's core themes include the illusion of concealment, omnipresent moral oversight, the unity of humanity nature and divinity in bearing witness, betrayal and self-sacrifice, the brutal reversal of predator and prey, and the transformation of a criminal into a figure of involuntary penance.

5. **The Moon:** It was translated in English by Nirendra Nath Thakuria. The poem weaves a single powerful image of a deer grazing at the heart of the moon to explore themes of identity, power, boundary, and the human impulse to define and control space. Then it asks who belongs on the moon: a man or a woman? One side believes the visible moon is feminine, shaped like a breast or vulva, while the hidden side is claimed by men. This shows how people project their own views onto nature and space.

India and Pakistan
Woman and man
Between the bodies
of the two countries
lies the God-given
wall (17-22)

The poem also reflects on political borders, comparing the moon's two sides to India and Pakistan, which are separated by what is called a "God-given wall." This line points out how nations and genders both get carved up by lines that may seem natural but are actually made by people. In just a few lines, the poem asks readers to think about who decides who owns a place, whether it's celestial or earthly, and how those decisions can split people, even when they feel justified by religion or tradition. Overall, the poem's main ideas

are that gender is not fixed or clear, space and identity are often claimed unfairly. The humans create walls, both physical and imagined, that separate and define us.

SAQ

1. Discuss the literary merits of Anubhav Tulasi

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2. Discuss the themes in Anubhav Tulasi's famous poems. How did he incorporate contemporary reality in his narratives?

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5.4 Critical Reception

According to Nilnihan Roy, a critic and faculty member of Assamese literature at Pandu College, Anubhav Tulasi's poems are easily understood even by general readers. He explains that Tulasi's work addresses a wide range of social issues and avoids the complexity often seen in modern poetry, making his writing more accessible. Roy also highlights that Tulasi explores his subjects with depth and chooses his words with great care, which adds clarity and impact to his poetry. Anubhav Tulasi has steadily emerged since the mid-1980s as one of the most formidable figures in modern Assamese poetry. Critics consistently emphasize on his signature blend of emotional intensity and stylistic restraint. His debut collection, *Naazmaa* (1985), immediately drew acclaim for its

sophisticated formal experimentation and thematic ambition. At the heart of Tulasi's work lies a deeply rooted sensibility to Assamese landscapes and traditions: rivers, bamboo groves, village rituals, monsoon stirrings, and pigeon-laden dusk populate his lines with such vividness that they seem to resist translation, a testament to their cultural specificity. Nirendra Nath Thakuria's assessment is instructive. He opines that Tulasi's "real forte" resides in his emotional subtlety, personal depth, and imaginative richness, yet his poetry never panders to the crowd, instead offering a quietly powerful contribution to Assamese letters.

5.5 Context of the Poems

Tulasi's formal language is marked by crisp precision and often likened to haiku-like minimalism. Yet it remains laden with evocative metaphors and layered symbolism. Works like *Democracy of Umbrellas* showcase his expert manipulation of language. This self-reflexive quality and his constant interrogation of words, poetic conventions, and meaning, places him alongside modernist and postmodernist traditions in Assamese and Indian poetry, even as he remains firmly connected to his ethnic and environmental roots. Thematically, Tulasi moves across various registers that are lyrical meditation, political satire, ecological reflection, and meta-poetic inquiry. Meanwhile, his socio-political poems, such as those on violence, consumer culture, bureaucracy, and global unrest, reflect sharp irony and satirical tone. Tulasi's environmental consciousness resonates with Assam's fragile ecologies. He treats human vulnerability and environmental fragility as intertwined subjects, weaving existential sensibility into elemental landscape. All of this is carried with a philosophical gaze. He is not merely recording personal emotions or rural life but interrogating language, existence. Academically, he is widely

referenced in studies of modern Assamese poetry, alongside poets such as Nilim Kumar, lending credence to critical appraisals that link his work to regional modernism extending to post-modern poetics.

The poem “It’s been Awhile Vincent” is rooted in the life and legacy of Vincent van Gogh, the Dutch painter who struggled with mental illness, poverty, and neglect during his lifetime but gained fame only after his death. Anubhav Tulasi invokes Van Gogh to explore the tragic condition of the misunderstood artist, drawing a parallel between Van Gogh’s suffering and the alienation of creative individuals in contemporary Assamese and global society. The poem reflects on the loneliness, vulnerability, and psychological burden of those who create art in a world that often fails to acknowledge or support them. It resonates within the broader Assamese cultural context, where artists frequently deal with neglect, lack of institutional support, and posthumous recognition. “Postmortem” emerges from a clinical and forensic backdrop, using the literal procedure of dissecting a dead body to symbolically examine the violence, apathy, and social decay in contemporary life. In the context of Assam, a region historically marked by political unrest, ethnic conflict, and systemic neglect, the poem reflects on the normalization of death and the routine nature of institutional examination of bodies. Tulasi uses the imagery of postmortem to raise questions about the value of human life, the cold detachment of authority, and the invisible suffering that precedes death. It provides a critical lens on how society processes tragedy, often with technical precision but emotional emptiness.

In terms of influence, Tulasi is credited with reinvigorating Assamese poetry and expanding its horizons, foreshadowing a generation of writers attuned to issues both regional and global. Critical studies continue to highlight his poems’ density, lyricism,

and interrogative stance, qualities that resonate in an age of ecological fragility, political uncertainty, and linguistic introspection.

To conclude, Anubhav Tulasi's critical reception is defined by the convergence of three pivotal qualities: rootedness in Assamese geography, culture, and ecology; formal and linguistic experimentation aligned with the broader currents of modern and post-modern poetry; and thematic multiplicity encompassing love, loss, politics, ecology, death, and art itself. His achievement is thus twofold: he is both a regional treasure—voice of his land, village, river—and a transnational poet whose poetic intelligence and global sensibility place him firmly within the wider discourse of Indian and world poetry.

SAQ

1. Discuss the social context of the poem "It's been Awhile Vincent" by AnubhavTulasi. What are the literary devices used in the poem?

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5.6 Reading the Poem "It's Been Quite Awhile Vincent," "Post-Mortem"

AnubhavTulasi's poem "It's been Awhile Vincent" is an introspective dialogue with the memory of Vincent van Gogh, representing a deeply personal and emotional exploration of suffering, alienation, and artistic identity. The poem was translated

by NirendraNathThakuria. The speaker's longing to speak with Vincent suggests more than admiration; it reflects a yearning for companionship in pain and creative struggle. Tulasi transforms Van Gogh into a symbolic figure, that is a voice for all tortured artists, whose emotional intensity and inner turmoil remain unrecognized during their lifetimes. The poem opens with a quiet appeal:

For days on end
I've longed for
a chat with you
Vincent
(Lines 1-4)

This desire to connect hints at loneliness, a craving for empathy from someone who might understand the weight of mental unrest and creative isolation. Vincent becomes a figure of solace, even though he is unreachable. The speaker notes:

I do not know
your present whereabouts
You too haven't let me know that
(Lines 5-7)

It reinforces the idea of silence between artists separated by time, death, and perhaps emotional distance. This absence mirrors the emotional estrangement the poet feels in his own environment. Tulasi grounds his emotional landscape in familiar natural imagery, blending the external world with internal anguish.

Lines such as:

over the green fronds of the areca nut trees
crows flew past
(Lines 9-10)

offer a serene rural scene, disrupted by the ominous presence of crows. Their flight connects to Van Gogh's painting "Wheatfield with Crows", often seen as a depiction of the artist's troubled state of mind. Tulasi also interlaces myth and memory:

Maybe the same ancient river
the same whisperings of women
trapped in the leaves of myth
(Lines 17-19)

These lines evoke hidden stories, suppressed voices, and cultural memories that remain unresolved, echoing the poet's inner entrapment. The poet also expresses raw anguish and self-directed violence, echoing Van Gogh's struggles with mental illness and his self-mutilation. The poem ends with fading hope:

That slice of hope
to have a chat with you
has gone down
in the western horizon
beyond the waterspout
(Lines 30-34)

The sunset symbolizes finality and despair, while the waterspout, an uncontrollable force, suggests emotional chaos. The poet accepts that his wish for understanding remains unfulfilled. Ultimately, "Vincent" is a meditative, melancholic reflection on the life of the misunderstood artist. It connects the personal pain of the speaker to the legacy of Van Gogh, portraying creativity as both a gift and a burden in a world that often fails to listen.

Anubhav Tulasi's poem "Post-mortem" is a stark and haunting portrayal of political violence, societal apathy, and the moral cost of not witnessing truth. It was translated in English by Nirendra Nath Thakuria. Through the imagery, Tulasi constructs a scene that is

both literal and symbolic, where a dead child's body becomes a lens to examine the conscience of society. The poem is deeply layered with themes of innocence lost, state brutality, false narratives, and the urgency of seeing and knowing, all of which are expressed through a powerful use of symbolism. The poem begins,

In the nine-year old chest
of Ruhul shot dead
at the Last Gate strike
two holes
Lines (1-4)

These lines introduce both the literal event; a child fatally shot during a political protest and the poem's symbolic core. The "two holes" in Ruhul's chest represent the brutal reality of violence against the innocent. Here, the theme of innocence destroyed by political forces becomes central, with the child's body symbolizing the vulnerability of those caught in the machinery of protest and state suppression. However, Tulasi does not describe these holes with gore or grief alone; he transforms them into sites of insight and metaphysical vision. They become symbolic openings into a deeper political and moral truth.

In the next lines, the poet says:

Through the big one
I look at the sky (5-6)

Here, the sky symbolizes freedom, transcendence, or even a plea for divine justice. The act of looking through a bullet wound at the sky is both ironic and tragic, it shows how violence leads to contemplation and reflection at a terrible cost. The sky also evokes the theme of unreachable hope or spiritual escape in the midst of cruelty. The sky, typically associated with openness and possibility, is accessed only through an act of irreversible loss. This

juxtaposition of horror and serenity reveals the poem's thematic tension of how beauty and brutality are often interlinked.

In the other hole
is set a telescope
through which one
can clearly see
the politics of the entire earth

(Lines 11-15)

The telescope placed within the second hole is a striking symbol. It represents enhanced political awareness, the act of seeing through violence into the core of worldly corruption and manipulation. It suggests that the truths of global politics, exploitation, and injustice are only visible when we confront the damage they cause. By inserting a telescope into a bullet wound, Tulasi emphasizes that insight comes through pain, and that the body of a murdered child provides more clarity than political discourse ever can. This reinforces the theme that true understanding often requires facing uncomfortable realities. This also points to the poet's belief that art and poetry must not look away from violence but should use it to reveal uncomfortable truths.

In the closing stanza, Tulasi writes:

Whenever eyes
are taken away
the true scenes
die down
and there sprout
wonders

(Lines 16-21)

These lines underline one of the poem's central themes: the importance of witnessing. The "eyes" symbolize moral attention, social awareness, and collective responsibility. Their removal stands

for societal indifference or denial, where silence enables the rise of falsehoods. When society turns its gaze away from injustice, the “true scenes”, which is the reality of oppression and suffering vanish. In their place, “wonders” like false narratives, comfortable illusions, or state propaganda emerge. The theme of illusion replacing truth highlights the dangers of detachment in politically turbulent times. The poem warns that the refusal to see is not neutral; it creates space for distortion.

Thus, through images like the bullet holes, the sky, the telescope, and the eyes, Tulasi constructs a powerful meditation on how violence forces vision, and how memory and responsibility must survive beyond the moment of death. The symbols in the poem converge to expose how pain becomes the only remaining instrument of truth. “Post-mortem” does not just examine a child’s body; it performs a symbolic autopsy of a world that continues to sacrifice the innocent while looking the other way.

5.7 Summing Up

Anubhav Tulasi stands as a significant voice in contemporary Assamese literature, known for his socially conscious poetry. His works blend vivid imagery with deep political and philosophical reflections, often focusing on themes like violence, innocence lost, social injustice, and the urgent need for witnessing truth. Through symbolic language and accessible style, Tulasi connects personal grief to collective trauma, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable realities and the ethical responsibilities of society. His poems reveal a world where pain and vision are intertwined, exposing systemic failures and challenging silence and detachment in the face of oppression.

5.8 Model Questions

1. How does Anubhav Tulasi use symbolism in his poem “Post-mortem” to critique political violence and social apathy?
2. Discuss the theme of innocence lost in Anubhav Tulasi’s poetry, citing examples from his works.
3. In what ways does Tulasi’s poetry reflect the ethical imperative of witnessing and confronting societal injustices?
4. Analyze how Anubhav Tulasi blends personal grief with collective trauma in his poetic imagery.
5. What role does the motif of vision and perception play in Tulasi’s poem “Post-mortem,” and how does it relate to broader political themes?

5.9 References and Suggested Readings

Prodhani, Jyotirmoy. “Ethnicity and Contemporary Assamese Poetry.” *Nehu*, Nov. 2014, www.academia.edu/9480694/Ethnicity_and_Contemporary_Assamese_Poetry.

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Unit-6

Robin S. Ngangom's "Funerals and Marriages"

6.1 Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 "Funerals and Marriages": The Poem

6.4 "Funerals and Marriages": An Overview

6.4.1 Setting and Background of the Poem

6.4.2 Detailed Analysis

6.5 Literary Features

6.5.1 Poetic Devices

6.5.2 Symbols

6.5.3 Form, Meter, and Rhyme

6.6 Summing Up

6.7 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *analyze* the poem critically,
- *understand* the history of the poem,
- *understand* the structure of the composition,
- *know* the poetic devices and symbolism used.

6.2 Introduction

Robin Singh Ngangom, born in 1959 in Imphal, Manipur, is a distinguished bilingual poet and translator who writes in English and Meiteilon (Manipuri). His literary career spans over three decades, during which he has emerged as a significant voice from Northeast India, articulating the region's socio-political complexities and personal narratives through his poetry.

Ngangom pursued his undergraduate studies in literature at St. Edmund's College, Shillong, and subsequently obtained his Master's degree from the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. He currently serves as an Associate Professor in the Department of English at NEHU, contributing to academia while nurturing his literary pursuits.

Ngangom's poetic journey commenced with the publication of his first collection, *Words and the Silence*, in 1988. This debut was followed by *Time's Crossroads* in 1994 and *The Desire of Roots* in 2006. His most recent compilation, *My Invented Land: New and Selected Poems*, was released in 2023, encapsulating his poetic evolution over the years. His poetry is characterized by a seamless blend of the personal and the political, often reflecting the tumultuous history and cultural tapestry of Northeast India. Ngangom's works delve into themes of identity, displacement, love, and the human condition, rendered through vivid imagery and poignant narratives. He articulates the experiences of a region often marginalized in mainstream Indian discourse, bringing to light its unique challenges and stories.

Beyond his original compositions, Ngangom has significantly contributed to literary translation, rendering Manipuri poetry into English, thereby bridging linguistic and cultural divides. His translations have played a pivotal role in introducing Manipuri literature to a broader audience, fostering cross-cultural appreciation and understanding.

Ngangom has also engaged in editorial work, notably co-editing *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from the Northeast* alongside Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. This anthology serves as a testament to the rich poetic traditions of Northeast India, showcasing voices that encapsulate the region's diverse experiences and perspectives. His collaborative efforts extend internationally,

having participated in translation workshops organized by the Wales Literature Exchange. These engagements have facilitated cross-cultural literary exchanges, enriching his own work and contributing to global literary dialogues.

Ngangom's literary excellence has been acknowledged through various accolades. He received the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry in 1994, recognizing his profound impact on Indian poetry. In 1999, he was honoured with the Katha Award for Translation, highlighting his contributions to literary translation. Further cementing his status, he was conferred the Sarda Translation Award in 2013, celebrating his role in promoting Manipuri literature through translation. His work has garnered international attention, leading to invitations to literary events such as the UK Year of Literature and Writing in 1995 and the Indian Writers Festival during the Year of India in Canada in 2011.

Ngangom stands as a seminal figure in Indian literature, particularly in bringing the narratives of Northeast India to the forefront. His poetry not only offers introspective musings but also serves as a chronicle of a region's struggles and resilience. Through his evocative language and commitment to truth, Ngangom has carved a niche that resonates with readers seeking authenticity and depth in poetic expression. His role as a translator and editor further amplifies his impact, fostering a greater understanding of Northeast India's literary landscape. By bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, Ngangom has ensured that the voices from his homeland find a place in the broader tapestry of world literature.

Stop to Consider

Ngangom intricately weaves his Meiteilon heritage into his literary works, reflecting a profound connection to his cultural roots. His poetry serves as a vessel for preserving and expressing the rich

traditions, landscapes, and socio-political realities of the Meitei people. In his collection *The Desire of Roots*, Ngangom delves into themes of identity, displacement, and cultural erosion. He poignantly addresses the loss of indigenous practices and the impact of modernization on Meitei culture. For instance, in the poem “My Invented Land,” he laments: “My people have disinterred their alphabet, / burnt down decrepit libraries / in a last puff of nationalism / even as a hairstyle of native women / have been allowed to become extinct.” This excerpt underscores the fading of traditional customs and the collective amnesia threatening Meitei heritage.

Ngangom’s reverence for the natural beauty of Manipur is evident in his vivid imagery and references to the region’s landscapes. He often portrays the hills, rivers, and flora not merely as backdrops but as integral elements of Meitei identity. In “Poem for Joseph,” he writes: “But I need a homeland / where I can recognize myself, / just a map or even a tree or a stone, / to mark a spot I could return to.” This longing for a tangible connection to one’s roots reflects the intrinsic bond between the Meitei people and their land.

Furthermore, Ngangom’s poetry often incorporates elements of Meitei folklore and mythology, enriching his work with cultural depth. By invoking traditional narratives and symbols, he bridges the past and present, ensuring the continuity of Meitei cultural consciousness.

6.3 “Funerals and Marriages”: The Poem

I’ve stopped going to funerals and marriages.
Any public demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me.
Solemnity withers me and I hate being genteel with a
pinstripe and noose around my neck. It is not that

I've forgotten acts of kindness or to wish
people happiness if they can find it anywhere. I
would, if I could, help the bereaved furtively after
the mourners have eaten and left. I have become truly
unsociable.

I don't know why anyone would like to be
comforted by anybody except people they love
selfishly. You only need hugs and kisses from people
you've known intimately, people from whom you
can exact a price. I cannot be comforted, except by
the woman I love illicitly.

I often wonder about the efficacy of marriages and
funerals. Could it be because others are as worried,
as I was during my own wedding feast that my friends
and guests would not show up for some strange reason?

As regards funerals, I know that if the house of the
dead cannot keep a demonic hold on me my absence will
really not make any difference. But I do not want to
be censored for not attending marriages or funerals. I
wish people would not invite me to weddings or bring
news of an old acquaintance's death. If I could
I wouldn't attend even my own funeral.

I remember the day I returned home, and without even
seeing my father I went to my aunt's house when
I heard my cousin had died during my long absence. I
tried to match my aunt's grief by trying to show
some tears in my eyes but only ended up sniffing like
a dog. After that, my cousin's sister, my other

lovely cousin, in whose body I first sang a liquid
tune with my tender mouth, gave me pineapple to eat
and we smiled at each other. I used to dip my hands
into her blooming breasts, a pair of frightened
pigeons. But later, my dead cousin appeared in my
dreams to play and protect me again as he did during
our childhood. He took a long a time to go away and I
had to spit three times to be sure that he
doesn't haunt me.

I remember this film about slum-dwellers in Bombay and
how after the tears and the burning they would bring
out their bottles of orange liquor and get drunk and
have a real ball. That's one funeral I would
like to attend.

6.4 “Funerals and Marriages”: An Overview

6.4.1 Setting and Background of The Poem

The setting of “Funerals and Marriages” is not confined to a physical space but is intricately tied to Ngangom's internal landscape—a realm where traditional mourning is supplanted by personal reflection, emotional complexity, and a profound sense of detachment. The poem invites readers to consider the multifaceted nature of grief and the ways in which personal history and emotional authenticity intersect with cultural rituals of mourning. The background of the poem is steeped in Ngangom's personal reflections on death and his relationships with loved ones. He recounts a poignant memory of returning home to learn of his cousin's death, describing his inability to authentically express grief: “I tried to match my aunt's grief by trying to show some tears in my eyes but ended up sniffing like a dog.” This moment underscores a

recurring theme in the poem—the struggle to conform to expected emotional responses during times of loss. Further complicating this narrative is his interaction with his cousin’s sister, with whom he shares a complex, intimate past, adding layers of personal history and emotional ambiguity to the funeral setting.

6.4.2 Detailed Analysis

“Funerals and Marriages” unfolds within a setting marked by emotional detachment and personal dissonance, particularly in the context of funerals. The poem eschews traditional depictions of mourning, instead presenting a landscape where the rituals of death are observed with a sense of alienation and introspection. Ngangom articulates a discomfort with public displays of grief, stating, “Any demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me. Solemnity withers me and dark elegance leaves no one moved.” This aversion to ceremonial expressions suggests a deeper disconnection from communal mourning practices, positioning the funeral setting as one of internal conflict rather than collective solace. Ngangom’s contemplation extends to the efficacy of funerals themselves, questioning their purpose and the authenticity of communal mourning. He muses, “I often wonder about the efficacy of marriages and funerals,” suggesting a skepticism towards these social rituals. This introspection is emblematic of a broader existential inquiry, reflecting on the nature of grief, memory, and the societal expectations surrounding death.

Lines 1-4:

“I’ve stopped going to funerals and marriages.
Any public demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me.
Solemnity withers me and I hate being genteel with a
pinstripe and noose around my neck.”

The poem opens with a stark declaration of the speaker's withdrawal from societal ceremonies. The juxtaposition of "funerals and marriages" — events marking the end and beginning of life chapters — highlights the speaker's comprehensive disengagement from communal expressions of emotion. The metaphor of a "pinstripe and noose" conveys a sense of suffocation and entrapment within societal expectations, suggesting that formal attire and decorum feel like a constriction rather than a celebration.

Lines 5-9:

"It is not that I've forgotten acts of kindness or to wish people happiness if they can find it anywhere. I would, if I could, help the bereaved furtively after the mourners have eaten and left. I have become truly unsociable."

Here, the speaker clarifies that their withdrawal is not due to a lack of empathy but rather a discomfort with public displays of emotion. The desire to assist "furtively" indicates a preference for private, sincere interactions over public ceremonies, which the speaker perceives as performative. The admission of becoming "truly unsociable" underscores a deep-seated alienation from communal norms.

Lines 10-15:

"I don't know why anyone would like to be comforted by anybody except people they love selfishly. You only need hugs and kisses from people you've known intimately, people from whom you can exact a price. I cannot be comforted, except by the woman I love illicitly."

The speaker expresses cynicism about the authenticity of comfort offered by others, suggesting that genuine solace can only come

from those with whom one shares a deep, albeit complicated, bond. The mention of an “illicit” love adds layers of complexity, hinting at forbidden desires and the solace found in unconventional relationships.

Lines 16-19:

“I often wonder about the efficacy of marriages and funerals. Could it be because others are as worried, as I was during my own wedding feast that my friends and guests would not show up for some strange reason?”

The speaker questions the fundamental purpose of societal rituals, reflecting on personal anxieties experienced during their own wedding. This introspection reveals a deeper skepticism about the sincerity and necessity of such ceremonies, suggesting that they may be more about social obligation than genuine emotion.

Lines 20-26:

“As regards funerals, I know that if the house of the dead cannot keep a demonic hold on me my absence will really not make any difference. But I do not want to be censored for not attending marriages or funerals. I wish people would not invite me to weddings or bring news of an old acquaintance’s death. If I could I wouldn’t attend even my own funeral.”

The speaker conveys a profound desire to detach from societal expectations, even in death. The hyperbolic statement about not attending their own funeral emphasizes a yearning for complete autonomy and freedom from social scrutiny.

Lines 27-31:

“I remember the day I returned home, and without even seeing my father I went to my aunt’s house when

I heard my cousin had died during my long absence. I
tried to match my aunt's grief by trying to show
some tears in my eyes but only ended up sniffing like
a dog."

This anecdote illustrates the speaker's struggle to conform to expected expressions of grief. The simile "sniffing like a dog" conveys a sense of inadequacy and perhaps a feeling of being emotionally disconnected or incapable of genuine mourning.

Lines 32-36:

"After that, my cousin's sister, my other
lovely cousin, in whose body I first sang a liquid
tune with my tender mouth, gave me pineapple to eat
and we smiled at each other. I used to dip my hands
into her blooming breasts, a pair of frightened
pigeons."

The speaker recounts an intimate and possibly taboo relationship with a cousin, juxtaposing sensual memories with the context of a family death. The imagery of "frightened pigeons" evokes a sense of innocence and vulnerability, adding complexity to the speaker's emotional landscape.

Lines 37-41:

"But later, my dead cousin appeared in my
dreams to play and protect me again as he did during
our childhood. He took a long a time to go away and I
had to spit three times to make sure he wouldn't haunt me."

The speaker experiences the lingering presence of the deceased cousin, indicating unresolved emotions and perhaps guilt. The act of spitting three times is a traditional gesture to ward off evil or bad luck, suggesting a desire to cleanse oneself of haunting memories.

Lines 42-46:

“I remember this film about slum-dwellers in Bombay and
how after the tears and the burning they would bring
out their bottles of orange liquor and get drunk and
have a real ball. That’s one funeral I would
like to attend.”

The poem concludes with the speaker expressing a preference for unrestrained, authentic expressions of emotion, as depicted in the film about slum-dwellers. This contrasts sharply with the earlier disdain for formal ceremonies, highlighting a longing for genuine human connection and celebration of life, even in death.

Check Your Progress

1. What role does memory play in the poem, and how does it influence the speaker’s perceptions of past events? (100-200 words)
2. What is the significance of the speaker's dream about his deceased cousin, and how does it contribute to the poem’s exploration of guilt and remembrance? (150-200 words)

6.5 Literary Features

6.5.1 Poetic Devices

- **Imagery:** Imagery is a prominent device in the poem, allowing readers to visualize and emotionally connect with the speaker’s experiences. Ngangom uses vivid descriptions to convey the speaker’s discomfort with social rituals and personal memories. For instance: “I used to dip my hands into her blooming breasts, a pair of frightened pigeons.” This metaphorical image evokes a sense of innocence and vulnerability, highlighting the complexity of the speaker’s past relationships. Such imagery

immerses the reader in the speaker's internal world, emphasizing the emotional weight of his experiences.

- **Irony:** Irony is utilized to critique societal expectations and the superficiality of social gatherings. The speaker's disdain for the performative aspects of funerals and marriages is evident: "I wish people would not invite me to weddings or bring news of an old acquaintance's death. If I could I wouldn't attend even my own funeral." This statement is laced with irony, as it underscores the speaker's desire to detach from societal norms to the extent of avoiding his own funeral. The irony serves to highlight the disconnect between genuine emotion and social performance.
- **Metaphor:** Metaphors in the poem convey the speaker's internal conflicts and perceptions of societal rituals. For example: "Solemnity withers me and Solemnity withers me and I hate being genteel with a pinstripe and noose around my neck." Here, "pinstripe and noose" metaphorically represents the superficial grandeur of social ceremonies, which the speaker finds emotionally barren. Such metaphors critique the emptiness of ritualistic displays devoid of genuine feeling.
- **Symbolism:** Symbolism enriches the poem by imbuing objects and actions with deeper meanings. The act of spitting three times is symbolic: "He took a long time to go away and I had to spit three times to be sure that he doesn't haunt me." This ritualistic action symbolizes an attempt to ward off lingering guilt or unresolved emotions associated with the deceased cousin. Such symbolism reflects cultural practices and personal coping mechanisms.
- **Tone:** The tone of the poem is confessional and introspective, marked by a candid exploration of the speaker's psyche. The

opening lines set this tone: “I’ve stopped going to marriages and funerals. Any public demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me.” The straightforward admission establishes a tone of vulnerability and honesty, inviting readers into the speaker's internal struggles with societal expectations and personal emotions.

- **Allusion:** Ngangom alludes to cultural practices and media to contextualize the speaker’s experiences. The reference to a film about slum-dwellers in Bombay serves as an allusion: “I remember this film about slum-dwellers in Bombay and how after the tears and the burning they would bring out their bottles of orange liquor and get drunk and have a real ball.” This allusion contrasts the authenticity of grief and celebration in marginalized communities with the perceived artificiality of formal ceremonies, reinforcing the speaker’s critique of societal norms.
- **Juxtaposition:** Juxtaposition is employed to highlight contrasts between genuine emotion and societal expectations. The speaker’s inability to express grief juxtaposed with his cousin's death illustrates this: “I tried to match my aunt’s grief by trying to show some tears in my eyes but ended up sniffing like a dog.” This contrast emphasizes the speaker’s emotional detachment and the performative nature of expected mourning behaviors.
- **Enjambment:** The poem’s structure features enjambment, where sentences and thoughts flow beyond the confines of individual lines. This technique mirrors the speaker’s stream of consciousness and internal turmoil. For example: “I don’t know why anyone would like to be comforted by anybody except people they love selfishly.” The continuation of thoughts across lines without pause reflects the speaker’s introspective and unfiltered expression of emotions.

- **Colloquial Language:** Ngangom employs colloquial language to convey authenticity and relatability. Phrases like “sniffing like a dog” and “get drunk and have a real ball” ground the poem in everyday speech, enhancing its accessibility and emotional resonance.
- **Anecdote:** The poem includes personal anecdotes that provide insight into the speaker’s experiences and perspectives. The recounting of visiting his aunt’s house upon his cousin’s death serves as a poignant narrative that underscores themes of alienation and emotional complexity.

6.5.2 Symbols

- **Funerals and Marriages:** The titular events symbolize societal expectations surrounding expressions of grief and joy. The speaker’s aversion to attending these ceremonies reflects a discomfort with the performative aspects of social rituals. By stating, “I’ve stopped going to marriages and funerals,” the speaker rejects the communal expressions of emotion that these events often entail. This withdrawal signifies a deeper disconnection from societal norms and a preference for private, sincere interactions over public displays.
- **Pinstripe and Noose:** The phrase “pinstripe and noose around my neck” combines the imagery of formal attire with that of execution. This juxtaposition symbolizes the suffocating nature of societal expectations, particularly those related to decorum and propriety. The “pinstripe” represents conformity and the pressure to adhere to social norms, while the “noose” conveys a sense of entrapment and the loss of personal freedom. Together, they illustrate the speaker's perception of social rituals as oppressive rather than liberating.

- **Illicit Love:** The speaker mentions being comforted only by “the woman I love illicitly,” highlighting a relationship that exists outside societal approval. This symbol underscores the theme of seeking authenticity in personal connections, even if they defy conventional morality. The illicit nature of the relationship emphasizes the speaker’s desire for genuine intimacy over socially sanctioned interactions, further illustrating his alienation from societal norms.
- **Frightened Pigeons:** Describing his cousin’s breasts as “a pair of frightened pigeons,” the speaker uses this metaphor to convey vulnerability and the fleeting nature of youthful desire. Pigeons, often associated with freedom and transience, reflect the innocence and impermanence of the speaker’s past experiences. This symbol serves to highlight the complexity of human relationships and the lingering impact of past intimacies on the speaker’s present emotional state.
- **Spitting Three Times:** The act of spitting three times to prevent his cousin’s ghost from haunting him draws from traditional superstitions aimed at warding off evil spirits. This symbol illustrates the speaker’s struggle with guilt and the desire to rid himself of lingering emotional burdens. It reflects the tension between cultural beliefs and personal experiences, emphasizing the speaker’s internal conflict and his attempts to navigate the complexities of grief and memory.
- **Orange Liquor and Slum-Dwellers’ Funeral:** The reference to slum-dwellers in Bombay who, after mourning, “bring out their bottles of orange liquor and get drunk and have a real ball” symbolizes a raw and unfiltered approach to grief. This imagery contrasts with the solemnity of traditional funerals, highlighting a preference for authentic emotional expression over

performative mourning. The “orange liquor” represents a break from convention, suggesting that true catharsis may be found in embracing one’s emotions openly and without pretense.

6.5.3 Form, Meter and Rhyme

- **Form**

Ngangom’s “Funerals and Marriages” adopts a free verse structure, eschewing traditional poetic constraints such as fixed stanza lengths or consistent line counts. This open form mirrors the poem’s introspective and confessional tone, allowing the poet to delve deeply into personal reflections without the limitations imposed by formal structures. The absence of conventional stanza divisions facilitates a continuous flow of thought, aligning with the poem’s stream-of-consciousness style. This structural choice underscores the speaker’s emotional detachment and his critique of societal rituals, emphasizing the authenticity of his personal experiences over communal expectations.

- **Meter**

The poem does not adhere to a regular metrical pattern, further reinforcing its free verse form. The line lengths vary, and the rhythm is dictated more by the natural cadence of speech than by metrical feet. This lack of consistent meter allows Ngangom to capture the nuances of colloquial language and internal monologue, lending the poem an intimate and conversational quality. The irregular rhythm reflects the speaker’s emotional turbulence and his resistance to conforming to societal norms, mirroring the poem’s thematic exploration of alienation and personal authenticity.

- **Rhyme**

“Funerals and Marriages” is characterized by its absence of a formal rhyme scheme. While occasional instances of assonance and consonance may occur, they appear incidental rather than deliberate. This lack of rhyme contributes to the poem’s prosaic quality, emphasizing content over form. By forgoing rhyme, Ngangom avoids the potential for lyrical embellishment, instead presenting a raw and unfiltered examination of the speaker’s psyche. This stylistic choice aligns with the poem’s overarching themes of disillusionment and the rejection of performative social conventions.

SAQ

1. In what ways does “Funerals and Marriages” serve as a commentary on the performative aspects of cultural ceremonies and their impact on individual authenticity? (150-200 words)
2. How does the poet’s use of vivid imagery and metaphor enhance the emotional impact of the poem? (100 words)
3. In what ways does the poem explore the dichotomy between public displays of emotion and private grief or joy? (100-200 words)

6.6 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Robin Ngangom and his poem “Funerals and Marriages.” For further reading, refer to the next section.

6.7 References and Suggested Readings

- Bordoloi, Mridul. “Robin S. Ngangom’s Poetry: A Critical Study.” *Poetry Without Fear*, 2020.
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- Ngangom, Robin S. “Poetry in the Time of Terror.” *Indian Literature*, vol. 49, no. 3 (227), 2005, pp. 168–74. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23341046>. Accessed 20 May 2025.
- Singha, Sukla. “From the Mnemonic to the Literary: Exploring Memory in Select Works of Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.” *Bharatiya Prajna: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Indian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2017. DOI: 10.21659/bp.v1n3.s203.

Block- III

Unit 1: Homen Borgohain: An Introduction

Unit 2: Homen Borgohain: Spring in Hell

Unit 3: Imran Hussain: An Introduction

Unit 4: Imran Hussain: Encroach

Unit 5: Mamang Dai: An Introduction

Unit 6: Mamang Dai: The Black Hill

Unit 7: Anjum Hasan: A Short History of Eating

Unit 8: Sishir Basumatari: The Real Mr. Borkotoki

Unit-1

Homen Borgohain: An Introduction

Unit Structure

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch
- 1.4 Homen Borgohain's literary and intellectual career
- 1.5 Situating Borgohain as a Short Story Writer
- 1.6 Homen Borgohain as a Short Story Writer
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *learn* about the life and works of Homen Borgohain,
- *situate* the author in the landscape of Assamese short story,
- *assess* Homen Borgohain as a short story writer,
- *obtain* a perspective for the reading of his story "Spring in Hell".

1.2 Introduction

Homen Borgohain, a renowned Assamese author and journalist, has left an ineffaceable mark on the literary landscape of Assam through his diverse body of work across multiple genres. He played a significant role during a transformative phase in Assamese poetry, when it began to assume a distinctly modernist character. Likewise, in the efflorescence of the Assamese short story during the celebrated *Ramdheni* era, Borgohain's fiction brought in a new sensibility and added considerable variety to the genre. His short

stories expanded the thematic and experiential range of Assamese fiction, offering fresh perspectives on contemporary life. Author of several widely read novels, Borgohain has remained a central figure in Assamese literature, not just as a writer but as an influential cultural force. Through his active engagement with literary institutions and public discourse, he fostered the growth of Assamese literary culture across all forms of writing. His works have helped shape literary sensibilities and have influenced generations of budding writers. Borgohain also had an illustrious career in journalism, marked by incisive commentary and a deep commitment to Assam's social and cultural life. His impact on the intellectual and literary spheres of Assam continues to be felt even years after his passing.

This unit introduces Homen Borgohain as a writer, with a particular focus on his contribution as a storyteller. It aims to offer an orientation to his literary world and prepare readers for the close reading of his short story "Spring in Hell," a remarkable narrative that we will discuss in detail in the following unit.

1.3 A Brief Biographical Sketch

Born in a small village in Dhakuakhana in northeastern Assam, Homen Borgohain was introduced to literature at an early age. His father's personal library played a formative role in nurturing his love for reading, an influence that is often credited with igniting his literary aspirations. He completed his schooling at Dibrugarh Government Boys' High School and subsequently moved to Guwahati for higher education. There, he pursued English literature at Cotton College and graduated with honours in the subject. Despite his rural upbringing, Borgohain developed a remarkably broad intellectual outlook. His curiosity extended beyond the

immediate world around him to urban modernity and global thought—interests that would later find resonant expression in his literary works.

In 1955, soon after graduation, Borgohain entered the Assam Civil Service, embarking on what appeared to be a secure and conventional career in government service. However, his literary inclinations remained persistent. While still in service, he began writing and publishing creative work during the 1950s, a period often described as the *Ramdheni* era of Assamese literature—named after the pioneering literary magazine *Ramdheni*, which was instrumental in promoting modern literary sensibilities in Assam. His debut publication, a short story collection titled *Bivinno Chorus* (“Several Tunes”), appeared in 1957. These early stories, drawn from personal experience, displayed a strikingly bohemian outlook and marked the emergence of a distinctive and bold voice in Assamese fiction. By actively engaging with the vibrant literary circles of the time, Borgohain became both a product and a vital contributor to the creative energy of the *Ramdheni* movement.

In recognition of his literary accomplishments and public contributions, Borgohain received several prestigious awards during his lifetime. Foremost among them was the Sahitya Akademi Award, which he was awarded in 1978 for his novel *Pita Putra*. He was also conferred the Assam Valley Literary Award, a lifetime achievement honour presented to outstanding contributors to Assamese letters. The Assam Sahitya Sabha recognised his influence with the Nilamoni Phukan Award, and the Government of Assam acknowledged his cultural contributions by bestowing upon him the Srimanta Sankardev Award, one of the highest civilian honours in the state.

Homen Borgohain passed away on 12 May 2021 in Guwahati due to complications following a COVID-19 infection. His death marked

the end of an era in Assamese literature, leaving behind a legacy that continues to shape the literary and cultural imagination of Assam.

Check Your Progress

- How did Homen Borgohain's early life and education contribute to the development of his literary sensibility? (50 words)

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- What role did the *Ramdhenu* era play in shaping Homen Borgohain's literary career, and how was he associated with it? (60 words)

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1.4 Literary and Intellectual Career

Homen Borgohain authored more than a dozen novels, several short story collections, and multiple volumes of essays over the course of his prolific career. His narratives often bridged the rural-urban divide: while some works drew upon the ethos of rustic Assamese village life, others vividly depicted the complexities of modern urban existence and its attendant social issues. His early short stories, marked by a candid realism, stood apart from the

conventional styles of his contemporaries, infusing Assamese fiction with fresh thematic and stylistic perspectives.

Among his most celebrated works is the novel *Pita Putra* (“Father and Son”), which received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978. Like many of his narratives, this novel offers a nuanced portrayal of familial and social relationships, resisting any overtly didactic conclusions. Another of his widely acclaimed works is *Halodhiya Soraye Baodhan Khai* (“The Yellow Birds Eat the Rice”), which foregrounds the plight of rural peasants in Assam. The novel gained wider recognition when it was adapted into a National Award-winning Assamese film directed by Jahnu Barua in 1988.

Borgohain’s other significant novels include *Saudar Puteke Naau Meli Jay*, *Subala*, *Timir Tirtha*, and *Matsyagandha*, each addressing diverse social and psychological dimensions of human life. In addition to fiction, Borgohain was an incisive essayist and memoirist. His major non-fictional and autobiographical works—such as *Atmanusandhan* (“Self-Search”) and *Mor Sangbadik Jivan* (“My Life as a Journalist”)—offer introspective reflections on his personal and professional journey, marked by moral questioning and self-evaluation.

Another notable memoir, *Dhumuhaar Ramdhenu* (“The Storm and the Rainbow”), evokes both the turbulence of Assam’s sociopolitical milieu and the creative efflorescence of the *Ramdhenu* literary era. Borgohain also explored collaborative writing: together with his wife Nirupama Borgohain (née Tamuli), herself a distinguished writer, he co-authored *Puwar Purobi Sandhyar Bibhash*, a novel published in the 1960s and regarded as perhaps the first jointly authored novel in Assamese literature.

Borgohain remained a towering presence in Assamese journalism well into the later decades of his life. Following his initial editorial

successes with *Nilachal* and *Nagarik*, he extended his journalistic influence through senior editorial positions in major dailies. His tenure with the Bengali daily *Ajkal* in Kolkata demonstrated his linguistic range and broadened his experience beyond the Assamese press. From 2003 to 2015, he served as Editor-in-Chief of *Amar Asom*, one of Assam's leading Assamese-language dailies. Under his stewardship, the newspaper became known for its incisive commentary and rich literary supplements.

In 2015, Borgohain assumed editorial leadership of *Niyomiya Barta*, a position he held until his death in 2021. Even in his eighties, he remained an active journalist. Colleagues from this period recall his unwavering commitment to editorial work, noting that he often dictated his columns, having largely relinquished longhand writing. His dedication remained undiminished despite the limitations of age and the disruptions of the pandemic. In fact, one of his final opinion pieces was published posthumously in May 2021, a poignant testament to his lifelong engagement with the written word.

Borgohain also held significant institutional roles within Assam's literary establishment. Most notably, he served as President of the Asam Sahitya Sabha during 2001–2002. His tenure was marked by an ambitious initiative to compile an Assamese encyclopedia—an endeavor that initially met with skepticism. Yet, through his determined leadership and the mobilization of scholars and resources, five volumes of the encyclopedia were successfully published. This monumental project underscored both his administrative acumen and his steadfast commitment to the intellectual and cultural advancement of the Assamese language. His leadership further consolidated his stature as a cultural custodian in Assam's literary and public life.

Check Your Progress

Mention any three major literary genres Homen Borgohain contributed to, and briefly describe his significance in any one of them. (80 words)

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1.5 Situating Homen Borgohain in the Trajectory of Assamese Short Story:

The early stirrings of the Assamese short story can be traced to the pages of *Arunodoi*, the first Assamese-language magazine, published from 1846. However, it was Lakshminath Bezbaruah who gave the Assamese short story its first distinctive form. His stories, published in *Jonaki*—a magazine that began in 1889—were formally and thematically closer to the folk tale tradition. Yet, in terms of subject matter, Bezbaruah's short fiction engaged with contemporary concerns. His narratives addressed issues pertinent to both Assamese and Calcutta-based societies and often portrayed the lives of tribal communities such as the Kols and Mundas. Romantic and reformist idealism permeated his work, which at times served as a vehicle for social criticism.

The Assamese short story thus began its trajectory with *Jonaki* and gradually flourished across several other magazines, including *Bijuli*, *Bahi*, *Usha*, *Setana*, and *Abahan*. Among these, the *Abahan* era marks the first major phase of development in Assamese short fiction, featuring prominent writers such as Sarat Chandra

Goswami, Dandinath Kalita, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan, Surjya Kumar Bhuyan, Mitraddeb Mahanta, Lakshminath Phukan, Mahi Chandra Bora, Bina Barua, Rama Das, and Radhika Mohan Goswami.

Sarat Chandra Goswami's stories, often set in Lower Assam, are imbued with a romantic sensibility and critique various social evils such as injustice, selfishness, and outdated customs. Themes like social disparity, widow remarriage, and exploitation by the affluent recur in his work, which retains a poetic charm. Surjya Kumar Bhuyan's stories, by contrast, are more urban-centric, highlighting economic hardships and portraying the joys and sorrows of common people. Dandinath Kalita's fiction is noted for its narrative simplicity and moral clarity, often dealing with issues like social inequality and widow remarriage.

Some of the key short story anthologies from the *Jonaki* to the *Abahan* period include Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *Surabhi* (1909), Sarat Chandra Goswami's *Golpanjali* (1914) and *Moina* (1920), *Bazikar* and *Paridarshan*; Nakul Chandra Bhuyan's *Churangchuwar Chara* (1918), Dandinath Kalita's *Satsari* (1925), and Surjya Kumar Bhuyan's *Panchami* (1927), among others.

It is important to note that, unlike the newspaper-fed short stories of Europe, the Assamese short story tradition largely evolved through readership sustained by books and literary magazines. As such, it developed within a vibrant periodical culture. Later, the magazine *Ramdheni* would inaugurate a new phase in the genre's evolution—an era that will be addressed in a subsequent discussion. As Edgar Allan Poe once remarked that the short story is the “offspring of American magazines,” a similar claim can be made for Assam: the Assamese short story was, in many ways, a harvest of the state's rich magazine culture (Pranita Sarmah, *Impact of Magazines in the Creation and Development of Assamese Short Stories*).

During the *Abahan* era, Assamese short fiction began to reflect the influence of Western intellectual currents, particularly those of Freud and Marx, and the broader epistemological shift in the West from religion to science. These ideas left an indelible mark on contemporary storytellers. The influence of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist critique is especially palpable in the stories of Lakshmidhar Sarma. In contrast, Roma Das's narratives tended to depart from social realism, drawing instead from romantic imagination. His stories often explored man–woman relationships, delving into themes of love, biological desire, and the anguish of separation.

Sayed Abdul Malik's short stories combined a lyrical romanticism with glimpses of darker social realities. Alongside depictions of love and physical attraction, one finds fragmented portrayals of societal decay—sketches of villains, prostitutes, and marginal figures. Broadly speaking, Assamese short fiction up to the *Abahan* era oscillated between two antithetical sensibilities: romanticism and realism. While psychoanalytic and Marxist influences were evident, the short story as a form remained largely conventional.

The 1940s, though rich in historical experience and intellectual ferment, did not see any significant formal innovation in the short story. However, this decade sowed the seeds for later literary transformation. A major shift occurred with the reappearance of *Jayanti* in 1943 in a revitalized form. It became a site for new literary thinking and introduced a Marxist worldview, reshaping the outlook of writers and nurturing the literary modernity that would blossom in the 1950s and 1960s.

This was a time of crisis and renewal—marked by the tumult of the non-cooperation movement, the devastation of war and famine, economic hardship, and a growing desire for social reconstruction. The impact of World War II destabilized established values and left

people spiritually disoriented. Yet, this era was also characterized by a recognition of material realities alongside profound hope and idealism. Sayed Abdul Malik's fiction exemplified this dual impulse: it conveyed utopian ideals while foregrounding the lives of society's dispossessed—goons, beggars, and prostitutes.

In this context, Homen Borgohain's emergence in the 1950s signals a complex literary shift. On the one hand, his work retained traces of the romantic tradition in Assamese fiction; on the other, it reflected a disillusionment with the idealism of his predecessors. Extending the thematic concerns of Sayed Abdul Malik, Borgohain turned his attention obsessively to the "low life" of criminals, sex workers, and the destitute. His fiction probed the darker recesses of social experience with a new sense of urgency. Moreover, the influence of Western thought—particularly existentialist and psychological paradigms—was more pronounced and self-aware in Borgohain's writing. Importantly, he expanded the range of the short story's subject matter, stretching the contours of middle-class life to its very limits in search of what is most poignant, mysterious, and unsettling in human reality. On the whole, Borgohain's short stories signalled a bold departure from the conventional narratives of his contemporaries. Writing in an era marked by experimentation, he drew early inspiration from existentialist philosophy and Freudian psychology, infusing Assamese short stories with themes and ideas then uncommon in Assamese literature.

Check Your Progress

Assess Homen Borgohain's place in the world of Assamese short story. (80 words)

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1.6 Homen Borgohain as a Short Story Writer:

His short stories, spanning over three decades, represent a profound engagement with both individual psychology and the broader socio-cultural dynamics of Assamese society. Through a wide range of characters and situations—often situated on the margins of conventional morality—Borgohain shaped a narrative world that was at once intimately human and critically interrogative. Borgohain's literary journey in short fiction began with a distinctive voice that was immediately recognized for its observational depth and philosophical orientation. These anthologies trace the evolution of a writer deeply committed to exploring the layers of human experience, often departing from conventional narrative structures in favour of psychological exploration and social critique.

Borgohain's stories shed light on those terrains of human reality that largely remain unexplored in Assamese fiction. Sex life, complexity of psychosexual relationship, and irrational aspects of human mind persistently figure in his fictional world as a theme. Freudian perspective allows him to explore the hidden aspects of human personality and relationship. In "*Octopus*" the main character Bob makes a shocking confession to having killed an old prostitute. The reason offered is uncanny yet thought-provoking, demonstrating the author's attention to those dark aspects of human psyche that go beyond everyday rationality. A complex mind stands revealed here, which works bizarrely as an effect of such varied elements as jealousy, sadism, delinquency etc. Here, Borgohain does not merely depict psychological disturbance for sensational effect; rather, he treats it as a valid subject of narrative inquiry, probing the emotional fault lines that shape moral collapse.

"*Abelir Alibatar Galpa*" presents a street watched over by the narrator—a street which is home to various people of the lower

strata, a site of varied social experience. The narrator's relation to this 'low life' of the street is intellectual as he keenly observes the ebb and flow of human reality and meditates on it. "*Ismail Sheikhar Sandhanat*" deals with the theme of migration from East Bengal during partition. The narrator, a former land officer who had evicted Ismail Sheikh and his family from their place in a governmental eviction drive, and later is haunted by a sense of guilt. To allay his guilt he arrives, in search of the victim of eviction, at the chamber of a prostitute who also suffers life's difficult ordeals and is a victim of the traumatic history of partition. The story intertwines the fates of the dispossessed and the morally displaced, suggesting that guilt and empathy are central to the human response to systemic injustice.

Psychoanalysis inspired quite a few stories of Borgohain such as "*Senatorium*," "*Mahaswetar Biya*," "*Epitaph*" etc. In "*Senatorium*" Jayanta Choudhury, the protagonist, feels a secret sexual attraction to his step-mother, and this mother-fixation keeps him from mingling with other women. In "*Mahaswetar Biya*" Mahasweta's father postpones the question of her marriage because she fills the void created after his wife's death. Neither does he tolerate her lover Amit—a case of Electra complex. In "*Epitaph*" Gautam Choudhury suffers from disease and feels utterly alone, eventually deciding to commit suicide. But before he kills himself, he kills his beloved dog to redeem her of a wretched life after he is no more. In the story "*Parda*", on the other hand, the theme is sexual life where three men revolve around a single woman who worked as a prostitute.

Borgohain is remarkable for his portrayal of low life in his short stories. In Bhabendranath Saikia, another short story writer contemporary to Borgohain, we usually perceive a middle-class world largely free from delinquency, crime, and perpetually discover, through details of middle-class life, the reassuring presence of an everyday reality. Extreme conditions of human life

such as poverty and its various manifestations do not figure in Saikia's fiction in a blatant and evident way. In this low life explored by Borgohain, women are the worst victims. Poverty, inhumanity, betrayal of men, and utter lack of human concern drag women towards the accursed underworld of prostitution. In "*Abelir Alibatar Galpa*" we have a Chinese old craftsman, reaching an age of sexual inability, who casts his wife to sell her body for money. Borgohain's stories engage deeply with social realities. He was acutely aware of post-Independence social changes and injustices in Assam for instance, in "*Jalchabi*", a powerful story set in post-Independence rural Assam, Borgohain depicts the plight of women who have been deprived and exploited for centuries. Far from idealizing village life, he exposes how traditional rural society can be cruel and oppressive. Men and women inhabiting forbidden alleys of social life figure prominently in Borgohain's fictional world. Complex attitudes, dispositions and motives shape them to a large extent, but they are also victims of a social destiny and hence carry an embittered social critique. Under-represented, if at all, in other contemporary writer's fiction, these characters inhabit the fringes of morality. Drunkards, gamblers, sex workers, pimps, murderers, beggars, ruffians—many of them are cruel reminders of social reality. They populate a moral landscape that is neither wholly condemnable nor redemptive, but rather inhabited by individuals bearing the scars of structural injustice, psychological trauma, and cultural abandonment.

Check Your Progress

- Discuss two major thematic concerns in Homen Borgohain's short stories, with examples from specific narratives. (100 words)

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- How did Homen Borgohain's portrayal of marginalized characters differ from that of his contemporaries in Assamese short fiction?

1.7 Summing Up

Homen Borgohain stands as a key figure in the modernist turn of Assamese literature that emerged during the *Ramdhenu* era of the 1950s. His influence is deeply felt not only in Assamese poetry and short stories but also across a wide range of prose writing. As an immensely popular author, Borgohain played a crucial role in shaping Assamese literary sensibility and in fostering a vibrant literary culture across the state. His stature as a short story writer rests on his masterful blending of narrative craftsmanship with incisive social and psychological insight. Within the fertile milieu of the *Ramdhenu* period, he pioneered a modernist approach that significantly broadened the expressive possibilities of Assamese literature. His short stories expanded the thematic and psychological scope of Assamese fiction by venturing into emotional terrains and social realities often overlooked by his contemporaries. Through a sustained engagement with psychoanalytic thought, existential inquiry, and the lives of the marginalized, Borgohain infused the

genre with intellectual depth and moral urgency—qualities that continue to resonate with readers and scholars alike.

1.8 References and Suggested Readings

Borgohain, Homen. “Spring in Hell”. Translated by Bibhash Choudhury. *Splendour in the Grass: Selected Assamese Short Stories*. Edited by Gobinda Prasad Sarma, Sailen Bharali, and Hridayananda Gogoi, translation edited by Hiren Gohain. Sahitya Akademi, 2010, pp. 191-213.

_____. *Poitrasta Galpa*. Students Stores, 2013.

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Unit-2

Homen Borgohain: Spring in Hell

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 What Happens in the Story
- 2.4 Characters
- 2.5 Critical Reading of the Story
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *learn* the plot of the short story,
- *critically* appreciate the text,
- *write* about the themes of the story.

2.2 Introduction

In the previous unit, we discussed at length the life and works of Homen Borgohain. A key figure in Assamese literature who emerged during the *Ramdheni* era of the 1950s, Borgohain made a remarkable contribution to both poetry and fiction. As a short story writer, he masterfully blended narrative craftsmanship with incisive social and psychological insight. It is important to recall that Borgohain was among the first Assamese writers to depict taboo subjects at a crucial juncture in the evolution of modern Assamese literature, thereby introducing a deeper social and psychoanalytical awareness into the fictional world. Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Bhabendranath Saikia, whose works often

feature intricate plot structures, Borgohain's stories tend to forgo complex plotting in favour of a more reflective and critical engagement with human and social reality. His narratives are frequently imbued with an existentialist tone, emphasizing internal conflict and moral ambiguity.

What follows is a summary of the plot of the story "*Spring in Hell*," originally titled *Narakat Basanta* in Assamese. This will be followed by a critical analysis of the story, which will further acquaint you with the central themes and distinctive features of Borgohain's short fiction.

2.3 What Happens in the Story

The story starts *in medias res*. Himadri, an inhabitant of an urban slum who pastes cinema posters and does odd jobs for a living, finds himself being addressed by an outsider. The stranger wants to talk to him and almost drags him to the latter's room, asking for shelter for a few days. Himadri is startled and perplexed at such an encounter, and even more so when he learns that the stranger knows his name and whereabouts. The stranger, named Sankar, does not reveal the purpose of his visit yet but enquires instead about the people living in that locality. At first reluctant to open his mouth, Himadri eventually shelters him and describes the people living there. It is a cramped, stingy space. Himadri falls fast asleep at night while Sankar sits up, speculating on the wretched condition of the people in that place.

The next morning, Sankar observes the reality of the *basti* from close quarters—how, for instance, a prostitute named Julie calls for a boy, Boltu, who works as a pimp for her. Himadri goes out for his work, and Joy—a well-built, tall man who is feared in the neighbourhood—steps in. At this point, Sankar's purpose of visit

stands revealed. He has arrived here in search of a woman named Manimala. She hails from a wretched migrant family with whom he came to be acquainted long back. A deeper connection of love and affection had developed between him and Manimala. Manimala's family, sheltered at another family's residence, had wanted to settle down. Sankar was not in a position to marry her and shoulder the entire family's responsibility. At this juncture, Niranjana came to help them. Promising to set up a grocery shop at Jorhat for the family, he brought them there. Separated from Manimala, Sankar wrote to her occasionally, but never received any reply from her. Apprehensive of Niranjana's ill motives behind his philanthropy, he went all the way to Moriyoni to meet him. Niranjana hinted to him about Manimala possibly resorting to prostitution. Sankar, now more doubtful about Niranjana's role in pushing the family toward such a predicament, left for Jorhat in search of Manimala.

With the help of another friend, Sankar eventually steps inside the *basti* and meets Himadri. From Himadri, he hears about Julie's life story. Grown up an orphan in a Muslim family, Julekha (Julie's original name) came to be in a relationship with a migrant boy, Rahim. Her uncle prohibited marriage with Rahim, and eventually, the couple eloped and arrived in this *basti*—a place in stark contrast to the scenic rural landscape Julie was brought up in. She struggled hard to cope with life in this dirty slum, its indecent register and ways, a condition of lack of privacy owing to the prowling male gaze. Her emotional life turns barren; the dire condition of poverty renders her husband harsh and indifferent. Emotionally starved and bereft of love and care, she finds herself being subjected to the *basti* ruffian Joy's sexual advances. One day Joy offers her ten rupees for sexual favour. Rahim happens to witness Joy's advances. Leave alone airing disgust and anger, Rahim merely allows Joy to go

ahead because he is ‘bored’ with her. Eventually, Julie succumbs to Joy’s sexual advances for ten rupees.

Back to the present time, the narrative depicts Sankar’s face-off with Manimala. Amid silence and speculation, he asks her about her mode of living. The answer is hard to come by. She says that selling one’s body is less scandalous than the horror of starvation. “You are bound to submit. I am lost, Sankarda, but please, in God’s name, don’t call me a prostitute” (211). She has nothing more to reveal and only earnestly yearns to rid herself of this hell of a life with Sankar’s aid. Sankar, deeply perceptive of the precarity of life here, shares Julie’s story. Then he suddenly stops—he hears someone’s footsteps. It is Boltu. Manimala steps ahead to prevent Boltu from revealing anything to Sankar. Boltu wrenches free from her grip and laughs indecently, insinuating at the stranger’s interest in Manimala, and at why he refuses to go to Julie’s chamber.

An awkward moment ensues. Sankar finds an unspoken answer to the question he had posed at the beginning, while Manimala remains doubtful about the real purpose of Sankar’s visit. The whole scene becomes a drama being watched with interest by Boltu from a distance.

Check Your Progress

1. Narrate the stories of Julie and Manimala. (100 words)

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2. Write about your first impression of the characters in the story, especially Sankar, Manimala and Julie. (100 words)

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2.4 Characters in the Story

Sankar: In Homen Borgohain's stories we often come across characters who perceive the life of others with sympathy. In other words, the author's attitude to life and reality often gets negotiated through these characters who are endowed with good sense and compassion for others as well as a sensitivity to the overall social reality. Perceptive to the ironies of social reality, these characters are themselves largely free from the author's ironic treatment. Sankar is one such character. He was in love with Manimala and cared for her family. But his refusal to marry her had a candid reason. Years after separation with the family, he sets out to trace her, as the rumour about her dubious profession reaches his ears. In Manimala's present place, the dirty and laconic air of the place and poverty is brought to life through his observation and consciousness. In other words, Sankar largely operates as an observing consciousness in the discourse of the story. His role in the story's diegesis, however, becomes more crucial towards the story's end. When Manimala suspects, from Boltu's remarks, that he has arrived here as a depraved man pursuing sensual pleasure from prostitutes, she airs embittered response. But Sankar does not feel it necessary to establish his self-righteousness, bowed down as he is by the sense

of life degraded to a dark hell. His response is markedly sober when he asks her to step inside the room for sorting out things.

Manimala: The character of Manimala is the centre of the story's diegetic world. She is the victim not of coincidence but bigger historical event. A plaything of history, she pursues her life through difficult terrains of survival struggle. As history pushes humanity to the dark plain of struggle for survival, all pretensions of civilization and morality expose themselves. Manimala in the inhuman and hellish world of the *basti* still embodies a yearning for dignified life. Unlike other women in the *basti* she keeps alive the hope of a return to the common stream of life. When she sees her long-separated lover in her place, this hope is ignited once again. She denies having resorted to prostitution, because she does not want to be hated by Sankar and mar the prospect of getting free from this doomed setting. As Boltu insinuates the 'real' purpose of Sankar's visit, she is pained with jealousy, revealing that she still feels the bond of love with him.

Other Characters: Himadri is an inhabitant of the *basti*, one who makes a living by pasting cinema poster and doing odd jobs. He lives in a small, dirty room. Seemingly indifferent to the ways of the world, he turns out to be one who can get along with others. He shares his room with a stranger, converses with him and tells him Julie's story. In comparison, Julie achieves more focus in the text. There are varied trajectories of life that comeingle in the slum. She elopes with her lover Rahim, eventually trying to cope with the difficult life in the slum. Rahim has been dehumanised by the raw survival struggle and poverty. She is compelled to take to prostitution even at the behest of her husband. Jay is a ruffian, a tall, vigorous lustful man who defiles Julie offering money and paves the way for her accursed life. Not all of these characters have been

delineated with detail and elaboration, but however sketchy, they are all projected as inhabitants of an earthly hell.

Check Your Progress

Write about the following characters in 5-6 lines each: Sankar, Manimala and Julie.

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2.5 Critical Analysis of the Story

“Narakat Basanta” is not a story of intricate plot structure; it presents a narrative that moves between past and present, thematically foregrounding dislocation while the protagonist strives to sustain a sense of continuity. As the title suggests, the story unfolds around a central paradox—hell and spring do not naturally coexist, yet here they are intertwined both spatially and psychologically. The hell that Manimala inhabits—at least temporarily—also reveals the faint stirrings of spring; similarly, a realm of irredeemable darkness coexists with a yearning for renewal, for redemption from the slum that signifies her personal hell. Borgohain’s story demonstrates structural flexibility by accommodating multiple storylines that, while distinct, converge in their revelation of a shared human condition—marked by suffering, displacement, and the fragile hope of transformation. In *Ismail Sheikh Sandhanat*, the guilt-ridden narrator’s search for the man he once evicted ends in a shadowy alley where he meets a prostitute

reading Moravia, whose backstory also reveals trauma and dislocation caused by Partition. Likewise, *Spring in Hell* becomes a story of stories as Shankar traverses the layered narratives of Manimala, Julie, and a refugee girl, each forced into prostitution or begging, each marked by historical rupture, or compelled by the instinct to survive.

This is a story that brings together the lives of people inhabiting an urban slum—a space occupied by the poor, the decrepit, the diseased, prostitutes, goons, and odd-job workers. Sankar, a central character, visits this slum and manages to stay for the night, though the narrative initially presents him as an outsider. Himadri is taken aback when a stranger halts him and requests shelter for a couple of days; the stranger's purpose remains unclear, creating curiosity in Himadri's mind—as well as in the reader's—regarding the identity and intent of this visitor, a feeling shared by other residents, including Julie, a prostitute. Himadri repeatedly enquires about Sankar's whereabouts, but receives no clear answers. What becomes overpowering, however, is the narrative's sustained focus on Sankar's observations of the slum and its inhabitants. Although he is a stranger to this space, it is through his perceptual lens that the narrative presents the poverty, squalor, and moral decay of the slum in a defamiliarized manner. As the story unfolds, the slum emerges as a social space that houses those on the margins of urban life, portrayed as a form of living hell. Borgohain's selective detailing vividly evokes the filth, vulgarity, and debased conditions that a section of humanity is condemned to endure. The sensuous texture of the environment speaks volumes about this larger degradation of life, as exemplified by moments such as: "The moon was already up, and odours from the toilet at the *basti* gate and also the marshes were quite strongly felt..." (192), and again, "The weak cries of an

ill and hungry child rent through the air, the obscenity of a Hindi-speaking woman could also be heard” (193).

“Spring in Hell” is an oxymoron, and the story unfolds a stark social paradox. Borgohain’s urban tales are marked by vivid depictions of social disparity, and in this story, although tension is initially created by withholding the purpose of Shankar’s visit, the reader is not kept in suspense for long before glimpsing his deeper social sympathies. Shankar sits up late into the night in Himadri’s room, troubled by the conditions of life in the slums and reflecting on the ironies that permeate the environment. In his consciousness, the squalor and degradation of the slums stand in painful contrast to the imagined serenity of distant, dreamy villages or the peaceful moonlight shining overhead. The romanticised vision of rural life—its harmony, music, and peace—is tragically counterposed against the grim, poverty-stricken existence of the slum-dwellers. As the narrative states: “And here, in this *basti*, life was caught up in the painful breathing of the diseased, in the anguished cries of the hungry child, and in the odours from the toilet and the pit, in the foul-smelling sweat of the exhausted harlot, in the stench emanating from the blood-vomiting frustrated plunk; it was caught up in the chaotic, tormented, hatred-ridden ugly shrieks” (194). By this point, the initial apprehension felt by Himadri toward

the stranger is already dispelled in the reader’s mind, even though the full revelations are yet to come.

The second part of the story brings into closer focus the characters of Julie, Paltu, and the ruffian Jay. While Himadri continues to represent a figure illustrating his own mode of survival in the slum, he plays little role in the ‘stories’ toward which the narrative increasingly gravitates—primarily the story of Manimala and that of Julie. Sankar, who enters the slum with the intention of observing its people, finds himself inadvertently drawn to Julie, as the detailed

narration of her appearance suggests. This gaze is not one-sided; it is reciprocated, and this silent visual matrix becomes a site of tension between two mentalities: the voyeuristic male gaze and Julie's defiant counter-gaze. Her assertive stare at the "newest import to the *basti*" challenges Sankar's position as an observer, compelling him eventually to look away—"Sankar was compelled to withdraw his gaze" (197). Julie's interest in Sankar becomes known through Paltu, who is surprised that Sankar expresses no desire to visit her. This conversation between Sankar and Paltu not only sharpens Sankar's understanding of the slum's brutal realities but also functions as a narrative scaffold, subtly preparing the ground for the story's final poignant revelations. It is structurally significant that Paltu becomes the one to register Sankar's lack of sexual interest in Julie, marking a shift from detached observation to moral engagement. In contrast, the narrative treatment of Jay does not delve into his psychology; he remains an opaque figure. However, the physical description of Jay serves to heighten the reader's sympathy for Julie, sharpening the emotional stakes of her story.

Julie's story brings us closer to the harsh realities of her married life with Rahim, revealing how the sheer struggle for survival amid poverty and deprivation has eroded the basic values of conjugal life. Uprooted from a naturally fulfilling existence in the countryside, Julie now finds herself in a claustrophobic slum environment, constantly exposed to the intrusive gaze of men in a locality that offers little in terms of privacy or dignity. Rahim's growing apathy and hostility deeply wound her, but the situation reaches its most disturbing point when Jay attempts to buy her sexual favours and eventually defiles her in exchange for money. Shockingly, rather than protecting her, it is Rahim himself who facilitates the act—effectively pushing his wife into prostitution.

The narrative focus then shifts to the long-awaited encounter between Sankar and Manimala, for which all previous events have laid the groundwork. Through his exposure to the lives of slum dwellers, Sankar has come to grasp the cruel social destiny of people, their raw struggle for survival amid poverty and indignity. He cannot bring himself to blame Manimala for the profession she has adopted; instead, he sees her as a victim of history, reflecting: “Like her, thousands of other refugee girls in their quest for survival must have followed this path to hell” (209). Though such troubled thoughts stir within him, Sankar finds himself at a loss for words—Manimala’s plight renders speech inadequate. His tentative utterance, “You’re alright, it seems,” is laden with ambiguity and, under the weight of circumstance, can only be misread as sarcasm. Manimala responds with a touch of irony, sensing the emotional distance in his words. While Sankar may understand the social compulsion behind Manimala’s fate, he unconsciously longs for confirmation—perhaps even a confession—from her. Manimala, in turn, is hesitant to reveal her truth, fearing that such honesty might provoke his resentment and shatter her faint hope of escaping this hell with his help. The tension between unspoken thoughts and spoken words gives rise to a profound silence—one that expresses far more than language can. When Sankar finally articulates his reflections on refugee women turning to prostitution and begging, his words are not aimed at Manimala, but instead emerge “like a soliloquy” (212). This moment is abruptly interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps, triggering panic in Manimala at the thought of her father or brother discovering the shameful reality of her existence. She attempts to prevent Boltu from disclosing anything, but the boy, hardened by the dehumanizing atmosphere of the slum, cannot be silenced. His crude insinuations about Sankar’s refusal to visit Julie strike a cruel chord, silencing both Sankar and Manimala. Sankar now fully comprehends the truth of Manimala’s

condition and responds with deep sympathy, while Manimala, overwhelmed by jealousy and anguish, lashes out—projecting her pain onto him. Her outburst - “How much will you pay me?” - is an act of desperation, to which Sankar responds with a quiet, understanding smile (212). He gently holds her hand and urges her to go inside, expressing his desire to share with her the story of Julie. This moment of emotional tumult begins to subside, and the narrative subtly gestures toward resolution. Boltu, however, shaped by the debased moral climate of the slums, remains oblivious to the emotional gravity of the moment and can only ‘grimace’ and ‘laugh out loud,’ misreading it as another mundane, forgettable drama.

The irony of life’s contrasting possibilities—the clash between the aspiration for a dignified existence and the dehumanizing conditions of mere survival—is embedded in the very title *Spring in Hell*. The vivid, sensuous depiction of “hell,” with its overwhelming filth, stench, and grinding poverty, paints a stark picture of degradation; yet the moon shining overhead gestures toward another dimension of life, suggesting beauty, serenity, and the enduring capacity for hope. Though Sankar harbors various suspicions about Manimala’s occupation, she appears to him as an embodiment of beauty—beauty that, while inevitably destined to fade, has not yet been entirely consumed by the vulgarity of the *basti*. Manimala, despite her surroundings, quietly nourishes the hope of escaping her current existence, and Sankar’s arrival rekindles in her a yearning for rehabilitation and a better life. However, *Spring in Hell* is not a tale of moral righteousness, nor does it dwell on the exceptional tragedy of an individual; rather, it is a story of many, of lives marked by historical displacement and the raw, ongoing struggle to survive against crushing odds.

Check Your Progress

- How does the title "Spring in Hell" reflect the central paradox of the story? (in 150 words)

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- Discuss the role of Sankar as both an observer and a participant in the lives of the slum dwellers. How does his perspective shape the narrative? (in 200 words)

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Julie and Manimala are portrayed as victims of historical and social forces. Compare and contrast their experiences and the narrative's treatment of their lives (in 200 words)

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2.6 Summing Up

“Narakat Basanta” by Homen Borgohain tells the poignant story of a refugee family from East Bengal who settle in a city in Assam after Partition. The daughter, Manimala, forms a romantic bond with a young man named Sankar. Later, Niranjan, promising them a better livelihood, takes the family to Jorhat. Years pass, and Sankar—troubled by rumours about Manimala’s questionable life—sets out in search of her. He eventually finds her in an urban slum, working as a prostitute—a truth she struggles to conceal. In this degraded environment, Sankar also encounters other women like Julie, whose lives have similarly tragic trajectories. Amid awkwardness and quiet humiliation, he resolves to speak sincerely to Manimala, reflecting on the broader suffering of women like her. The central characters—Sankar and Manimala—embody the tragic destiny of a romantic relationship shaped and thwarted by history. Sankar emerges as an empathetic quester, while Manimala represents the victims of historical trauma. Other characters—Himadri, Julie, and Boltu, the child who pimps for her—serve as cruel reminders of social decay and marginalization. In this, as in many of Borgohain’s stories, we witness what Frank O’Connor terms the ‘submerged population group’—the marginalized sections of society. Yet even amid their crudity and material and spiritual poverty, Borgohain’s portrayal is marked by a quiet humanism. Sankar embodies this humanism, ultimately suppressing his impulse to judge and instead reaffirming his sense of compassion. The story explores themes of historical displacement and social destiny: Manimala is a victim of Partition, while Julie is crushed under familial orthodoxy that forbids romantic love. The irony in their lives is unmistakable—Manimala meets her former lover in the most unlikely setting, while Julie elopes with her lover only to be prostituted in the slum. The encounter between Manimala and

Sankar becomes the narrative's emotional centre; while she tries to conceal her present life, Sankar seeks to understand it. For Manimala, the sight of her former lover after years in the slum rekindles a desire to escape and begin anew. At the heart of this powerful short story lies the stark contrast between the aspiration for a better life and the dehumanizing conditions of survival.

2.7 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit-3

Imran Hussain: An Introduction

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Imran Hussain : Biography
- 3.4 Literary Merits of Imran Hussain:
- 3.5 Imran Hussain as a 21st Century Assamese Writer: His Postmodern Conscience
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 Model Questions
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *inform* you about the literary merits of the writer,
- *explain* the postmodern interpretations of his writings,
- *introduce* you to his short stories.

3.2 Introduction

Imran Hussain is a famous short story writer, translator, critic and a lexicographer in the contemporary Assamese history of literature. Mostly known for his short stories *Hudumdao aru Annanya Golpo*, Imran Hussain has worked on folkloristic, linguistics and literary theory and successfully compiled *A modern and Postmodern Terminology*. The present unit is an attempt to make you familiar with this famous contemporary creative writer of Assam.

3.3 Imran Hussain : Biography

Imran Hussain, born in 1966 is a sound critic and a creative writer from Assam known for his amazing mythical, and folklorist writings

in Assamese. He works as an Associate Professor of Political Science in Sipajhar College, Darrang, Assam. His *Hudumdao aru Annanya Golpo* was published by Sahitya Akademi in Assamese in 2003. He acted as the founding editor of a literary magazine called *Bhoomi*. He was an active member in the editorial board of *Yaatra, A Journal of Assamese Literature and Culture*. It is important to mention here that his stories have been translated into English by *Indian Literature, Katha, Chandrabhaga and Yaatra*. These translated stories have been included in *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India*, edited by Tilottama Misra for Oxford University Press in 2011. *The Water Spirit and Other Stories* was one of his recently published story collections translated from Assamese into English by Mitali Goswami. This collection includes some of his interesting narratives on nature and folk culture such as “Bak”, “Pokhila”, “Hudumdao (The Rain God)” and “Bosikaran (The Enchantment)”.

Like any other writers, Imran Hussain was a product of his own times. He was deeply influenced and touched by the socio-cultural waves and changes of his times. Born and brought up in the district of Dhubri, Assam, Imran Hussain’s cultural consciousness and sensitivity sprang from his experience of exclusion and alienation from the mainstream culture and topography and his writings exhibited a strong reflection of his socio-cultural and historical sentiments, beliefs. Imran Hussain opined that the childhood experiences often play a pivotal role in an artist’s life. Hussain’s home in Dhubri was situated opposite to a huge dirty slum known as ‘Dabri’. This was a dangerous place nearby an ended railway line where the prostitutes, pickpockets, murderers, drunkards and movie-blackens stayed. He had witnessed several riots and murders in his childhood days during the time of Assam’s Bhasha Andolan. He would have gone astray if his father late Liaquat Hussain had not

been there with him. His father was a strict teacher, an artist as well who painted a picture of Sankardeva in 1962. Hussain was also deeply influenced by his grandfather who had great skills in telling stories and sagas including, legends of Hassan-Hussain, the sagas of Islamic Prophets and the tales of *Arabian Nights*.

Awards and Recognitions:

- ❖ Imran Hussain was awarded the Katha Award in 1999 for his Creative Fiction
- ❖ In 2001, Imran Hussain received the Chandraprava Baruah Memorial Award.
- ❖ In 2007, Hussain was awarded the Jehirul Hussain Memorial Award for his remarkable contributions in short stories and fictions.

3.4 Literary Merits of Imran Hussain

Imran Hussain's stories were mostly urban stories even though they are wonderful blend of myth, folklore and superstitions. His strong sense of imagination and fancy has been shaped by his contemporary social and cultural events and happenings. As he was born and brought up against an awful milieu and the crisis of his times, Hussain had a great learning experience. He was not only a writer of rural folk life but also a strong critic of urban culture and lifestyles. He wrote his first story "Chetana" based on his childhood experiences on Communal violence as a student. Imran Hussain did not want to become simply a writer of urban life. He went beyond that and explored the Rural suburbs, the myths, beliefs and cultures of indigenous people. He fell in love with the diversity and vividness of folk cultures and life. As he has himself mentioned in one of his interviews, his contact with the writings of the renowned writers Mahashweta Devi and Manik Bandopadhyay awakened his

interest and conscience towards life of the subaltern rural people. Thus his literary discourses also voice for the voiceless. It is in this sense that we call him a postmodern writer, somebody who attempted to write for the rural subalterns.

SAQ

1. What were the literary influences on Imran Hussain? How will you categorize him as a writer in the twenty first century?

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2. Write briefly about his education , career and literary contributions.

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3.5 Imran Hussain as a 21st Century Assamese Writer: His Postmodern Conscience

In the Assamese history of folklore and mythical writings the postmodern Assamese writers have made laudable contributions. Among such luminaries are Hare Krishna Deka, Anuradha Sarma Pujari and Arupa Patangia Kalita. In his Chandra Prasad Saikia Memorial Lecture, 2016 on Assamese novels of the past two decades, veteran critic Prof. Gobinda Prasad Sarma said that the young Assamese novelists have been making laudable efforts and they carry the potential to lead Assamese literature to greater

heights. This is indeed an important observation made by Prof. Sarma and this underlines the optimistic future of Assamese writings in India. Imran Hussain is a popular name in this field of postmodern cult of writing. The writings of renowned writers such as Debabrata Das, Dr. Pradipta Bargohain and Hare Krishna Deka have practiced deconstructive strategies to defamiliarise situations and context in the post-modern sense. The post-structuralist conscience is reflected in Arupa Pangia Kalita's short stories collected in *Written in Tears* (2015), *The Musk and the Other Stories* (2017) and *The Loneliness of Hira Barua* (2020) with focus on history, memory, trauma and postcoloniality.

In the realm of Assamese short story literature the names you remember are Lakshminnath Bezbaruah, Birinchi Kumar Barua, Abdul Malik, Mahim Bora, Sneha Devi, Bhabendranath Saikia, Indira Goswami, Saurav Chaliha, Lakshinandan Bora, Debabrata Das and Arupa Patangia Kalita. Rasaraj Bezbaroa was a pioneering figure in the realm of short story writing in Assam whose stories are a reflection of Assamese life, people and culture. His stories are best remembered for their humorous treatment of characters, for revitalizing Assamese language and culture. It is important to mention here that the Jonaki era and the Awahon era were considered the best period for the development of Assamese short stories and their subject matters were mainly concerned with folk tales, history and contemporary social issues. In fact, the advent of Western literary forms such as novels, short stories in the nineteenth century had a great impact on Assamese literature.

In the post modern times in India, short stories had great transitions often reflecting on post Independence India and its socio-political landscape. The use of irony and parody was frequently seen to critique societal norms and conventions. They are experimental in terms of use of language and structure of their plot. Post modern

short stories offer commentaries over social and political matters and address issues concerning social injustice and discrimination.. In English literature, the prominent names in post modern literature from India are Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Upamanyu Chatterjee Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, and Shashi Deshpande. They have focussed on themes such as migration, cultural memory, questions of identity, cultural alienation, complexities of India history, culture and politics.

Anita Desai is concerned about themes such as isolation, alienation etc. A few of her stories are “ Games at Twilight and Other Stories, Diamond Dust and Other Stories, The Artist of Disappearance in the form of novellas.

Mahasweta Devi’s powerful short stories include themes concerning exploitation, resistance, m, women facing violence. Her remarkable stories include Breast Stories.

The winner of the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Book prize 2019 for the book *Tejo Tungabhadra*, the writer Vasudhendra is a major short story writers in India in recent times who has written many short stories such as Mohanaswamy (2013), Hampi Express (2008) and Ugadi (2004). The tale of *Tejo Tungabhadra* is a remarkable contribution to Indian historical fiction.

In Assamese history of literature we find many writers working on postmodern themes. The post modernist conscience is experienced in the writings of Purabi Barmudoi, Mousumi Kandali, Monika Devi, Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Navakanta Barua, Arupa Patangia Kalita, Nilima Kumar,

Among the young writers from Assam such as Imran Hussain, there has been an inclination towards mythical contents, lore and oral history Imran Hussain’s short stories have the postmodern

tendencies because they deal with the conflicts between the myth and reality and the psychological complexities of characters. The elements of the marginalized discourse are frequently found in his discourse. His technical use of local vocabulary, local culture and multiple perspectives on life and society is what makes his narrative captivating and unique.

Mitali Goswami, one of the translators of Imran Hussain's short stories, observes the following,

The predominant mindset is one where history and contemporaneity, theory and praxis, the every day and the exotic come together in a balanced manner to make a comprehensive whole.

Mitali Goswami opines that Imran Hussain can be said as a path-breaker in this transition, in incorporating 'multi-dimensionality' and in displaying 'cultural consciousness' and 'rootedness'. In her own words,

Born out of the experiences gained through his childhood in Dhubri, a border district of western Assam, sensitivity springs from a sense of acute alienation from the mainstream, as well as a unique socio-historical topography, set apart from the rest of Assam. (Goswami, Postscript)

Thus it is clear from Goswami's observation that Imran Hussain's writings were rooted in the culture and history and politics where he belonged to. Along with that, his stories share the common emotions and perceptions that inhabit a sense of universality. His stories \beautifully weaves the mythical, psychological, magical realism. His subaltern consciousness is seen in the portrayal of characters such as Pabhoi, Seuti in the story "Bak: the water spirit", the character

of Bristi and Nirmala in “Grash: Encroach” and also in the portrayal of oppressed characters such as the landless tenants, the women and the field workers. Against such a subject, Hussain’s fictions prove to be quite courageous and resilient. Hussain’s portrayal of a culturally complex, multidimensional society where people preach and practice different mythical and philosophical contents reflect Hussain’s understanding of the society and his intension to critically look at its land and people. For instance, in the story *Hudumdao*, the writer has mentioned about a local ritual called Hudumpooja , one traditional fertility rite which are practiced by peasant women in some rural areas of lower Assam and also West Bengal. The story is also about the peasant’s uprising in the lower Assam parts and the rise of the local leaders like Zamir sheikh, Pahali Mondal and others. The story of *Hudumdao* beautifully weaves the real and mythical content by incorporating the mythical story of Behula-Lakshindar. In this story we find a subversion of the traditional narratives which is a characteristic feature of postmodern writings. In the story *Hudumdao*, we find the mythical Sati Behula going to Yama, the God of Death , to bring back her husband to life. Like any other post modern writer, Imran Hussain’s objective is to revision the past from the present perspective. Here you should know about some of the features of postmodern interpretations. Ihab Hassan, one of the theorists of Postmodernism states, “A revision of Modernism is slowly taking place, and this is another evidence of Postmodernism.” (Hassan, 32). Hassan, however states that in revaluing or revision Modernism does not cease but coexist with Postmodernism. It implies that Postmodern offers a new insight to an existing one. According to Hassan,

“Postmodernism may be a response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable that Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments.” (Hassan 39)

In Imran Hussain’s narrative we trace a sense of revisiting the past through his imaginary world and we experience this sense of coexistence of the real and the mythical. Translator, Mitali Goswami’s observation below further explains the postmodern conscience of the writer,

Rich in imagery, these stories also reflect a kind of magic realism in its narrative and in the suggestive use of imagery and symbols. Making good use of the structurality of language, the

writer creates a world sharply realized in its photographic details, yet unfamiliar, unknown and mysterious. (Goswami, ‘Postscript’)

Stop to Consider

Magic Realism in Postmodernism:

There is a distinction between fantasy and magic realism. Fantasy takes us to a completely different world while in magic realism, magical world serves a symbolic purpose. Magic realism deals with a realistic world and it draws reader’s attention towards alternate perspectives. In terms of theory, magic realism is a Latin American narrative strategy with a matter of fact inclusion with mythical and fantastic elements (according to Britannica). This term was first applied by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpenter in 1940s and prominent users include Colombian Garcia Marquez, Brazilian Jorge Amado, Argentine, Jorge Luis Borges.

Another important feature of Imran Hussain’s stories is the characterization of Assamese Women. The image of a strong

Assamese woman is evident in stories such as *Pokhila: The Butterfly* and *Jatra: The Journey*. Hussain has successfully portrayed the role of an independent woman in his stories, thereby raising the feminist's conscience. These women in Hussain's narrative are courageous, rebellious though marginalized and deprived in society. They know how to resist oppression and fight for their rights. The character of Rabeya is a strong character in the story *Jatra: The Journey* who challenges the Muslim Hadis.

We remember the social reformers of Assam in the nineteenth century such as Hemchandra Barua, Gunabhiram Barua whose writings reflected upon social transformations and cultural reorganization. They critiqued religious ostracism, society's binary rules for women in order to transform the society. We also remember *Rasharaj* Lakshminath Bezbarua used strong humour to transform his society. You should also understand the role played by Jyotiprasad Agarwala whose first Assamese movie *Joymati* (1935) was based on Bezbarua's *Joymati Konwari*. The historical story is about one of the stoic figures of Assam *Joymati* who refused to reveal the truth about her husband, Gadadhar Singha. Bishnu Prasad Rabha who is remembered for his historic songs on revolution, transformation of society also been an inspirational figure in the development of Modern Assamese literature. Thus since 1940s in Assamese literature, there has been a transition in terms of subjects of literature- a transition from romanticism to realism. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Ambikagiri Raichoudhuri expressed strong emotions concerning social changes and revolution. The sentiments against foreign oppression, social inequalities, blind faith, superstitions, religious orthodoxies were questioned through artistic enterprise. Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-64) who wrote under the pseudonym Bina Barua wrote books such as *Jivanor Batot* (1944) and *Seuji Pator Kahini* (1958) and expressed her concern about the gradual

decline of rural and natural life and upsurge of industries and commerce. Hence since 1950s Assamese literature has introduced a wide range of writings with response to cultural and social transformations following industrialization and massive urbanization. Imran Hussain is one among those writers who have strongly responded to the cultural transitions in society by critiquing the traditional orthodoxies and malpractices. By embracing a subversive literary technique, Hussain has traversed the boundaries of Assamese fiction and gives it a postmodern touch. Deconstruction is a major tool in Postmodern techniques of writing. This has been practiced in the narrative by 'self-other' dialogue, as Mitali Goswami has rightly mentioned. Imran Hussain has made the best use of this technique to challenge the traditional narrative of culture and society with an aim to correct the society. The Postmodernists use 'dehumanization' as a method to humanize society. As Ihab Hassan has stated in his book *The Postmodern Condition* that dehumanization in postmodern context refers to antielitism, antiauthoritarianism, diffusion of the ego where art becomes anarchic, irony becomes radical with inclusion of comedy of the absurd. Here Hassan writes that 'dehumanization' in both Modernism and Postmodernism means the end of the old Realism (Hassan, 41). In this context Hassan states about the importance of revisioning literary and authorial self.

Imran Hussain's narratives endows us a scope to delve into this revisioning process where we constantly travel between the mythical and the real in order to understand the context of the story. Ihab Hassan mentions that Postmodernist endeavour makes a fusion between the fact and fiction and also authorial self-reflexiveness (Hassan 42). In Imran Hussain's stories the readers enjoy a privileged position and participates in the process. The following are some of the important features of Postmodern theory of philosophy

suggested by Ihab Hassan. You may explore these areas to explore the themes in Imran Hussain's Postmodern narrative.

Stop to Consider

Features in Postmodernism according to Ihab Hassan:

1. Indeterminacy: all manners of ambiguities, ruptures, displacements affecting knowledge and society.
2. Fragmentation: disconnections, preference for montage, collage, metonymic content
3. Decanonization: all conventions of authority, applies to all canons, demystify knowledge, deconstruct language of power, desire; heterogeneity of language games
4. Self-less-ness, depth-less-ness
5. The Unpresentable and the unpresentable: formlessness, magic realist approach, Anti iconic
6. Irony: Play, interplay, dialogue, allegory, self reflection
7. Hybridization: Replication of genres
8. Carnivalization: referring to Absurdist ethos of postmodernism , heteroglossia. A Bakhtinian Concept
9. Performance and participation: Gaps must be filled as per postmodern philosophy
10. Constructionism: World making, construction of reality
11. Immanence: Going beyond religious ethos, dealing with collective sentiments

In Imran Hussain 's narratives we find a polyphony of different perspectives which enable his readers to participate in the meaning making process. His narratives offer a fusion of the past and the present and mirror the contemporary social and cultural dilemma and ethos. Dream is a technique that he frequently used in his short

stories to reflect on the present. In a very creative and concrete way Hussain has explored the socio-cultural context of his times. He played his role both as a critic and a philosopher in his narratives. We hear the voice of both victim and the oppressor in his narrative. The writer's intention is to invite his readers to the debate. However, it would be not proper if we call Imran Hussain simply a postmodern writer. Even though his method of writing was polyphonic in nature, his themes are mostly indigenous issues-questions concerning religion, culture and tradition. On the one hand, the writer exhibited the rich ancient traditions and beliefs of his times, and critiqued the malpractices in society in the other. Imran Hussain had a rich knowledge about the religious and cultural practices in Assam and he has been a researcher for a long period. Hence his writings reflect on his extensive knowledge about Assamese history, tradition and cultural practices. In the art of storytelling, Imran Hussain in his own experimental way, has created his fictional world communicating with his readers about myth, reality and dreams. The translator of the book *The Water Spirit and Other Stories* Mitali Goswami defines his stories as 'Post-colonial tales of tremendous courage, strength and resilience' and quotes Terry Eagleton to reflect on the stories of Imran Hussain. She quotes,

'All literary works are "rewritten" by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a "rewriting".' (Terry Eagleton).

Indeed, Imran Hussain is rewriting the past to reflect on the present scenario in Assam. The changing socio- cultural sceneries in Assam following massive urbanization and industrialization, the impact of such a huge change in people, the conflict between the old and the new find expression in his narratives.

3.6 Summing Up

Imran Hussain's short stories are rich treasures of the vibrant cultures of Assam. The conglomeration of the folk and the mythical uplifts his stories to other levels of thoughts and interpretations. Hussain is a twenty first century short story writer with the vision of our past social reformers whose narratives invite social criticism and cultural transformations. The linguistic variations and his strong sense of culture must be understood to explore his literary universe. To have a composite understanding of the stories, you need to also focus on Hussain's use of local dialects, images and songs.

3.7 Model Questions

1. Discuss briefly about the contributions of some of the major Assamese writers in the nineteenth century .
2. What is Postmodernism? Mention the features of Postmodernism and compare with earlier trends of criticism.
3. Do you think that Imran Hussain set a new trend in Assamese literature? Justify your answer.
4. How does Hussain incorporate Realism with Myth in his narrative? Give examples of such narratives.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

Hassan, Ihab. *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in postmodern theory and culture*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1987

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Unit-4

Imran Hussain's: "Encroach"

Unit Structure:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Reading Imran Hussain 's "Grash" (" Encroach")
 - 4.3.1 Theme and Plot
 - 3.3.2 The Theoretical Context
 - 3.3.3 Significance as a Short Story
- 3.4 Literary Strategy and Language in "Encroach"
- 3.5 Characterization in the Story
- 3.6 Summing Up
- 3.7 Model Questions
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

4.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *understand* the cultural context concerning the text "Encroach",
- *explore* the characters in the light of the cultural context,
- *explain* the nature of narrative and its literary devices and strategies.

4.2 Introduction

Imran Hussain (1966) is a renowned contemporary experimental writer, a folklorist and a linguist who has been well known as a critic, translator and lexicographer. His books on short stories *Hudumdao aru Aanyanya Golpo* acclaimed popularity and they were published by Sahitya Akademi in Assamese in 2003. His

stories have been translated to various other languages in India. In the previous unit you were introduced to one of the important contemporary writers from Assam, Imran Hussain whose writings have added a new dimension to Assamese literature. In this unit you will be provided the cultural context and textual interpretations for a comprehensive understanding of his prescribed text.

4.3 Reading Imran Hussain 's "Grash" (" Encroach")

The story is included in Imran Hussain's popular short story collection. *The Water Spirit and Other Stories (2015)*

4.3.1 Theme and Plot

Imran Hussain's "Grash" (Encroach) is a beautiful short story about a girl, Bristi who was mortified by the death of her beloved grandfather and her favourite old tree.

Critique of Deforestation:

The story offers a strong criticism against unrestrained, thoughtless industrialization and massive deforestation in the state. Bristi was very dear to her grandfather who used to tell her stories of Aesop's tales, Tolstoy's stories, stories of *Vikram - Vetal* and *Kamala Kuwori*. Just like her grandfather, she had a close connection with a huge aged gnarled tree in her compound. The tree was like her 'soulmate', her constant companion since her childhood days. During her long time of loneliness, she used to sit by the window watching the tree and enjoyed the myriad shades of life in the tree. The tree seemed to be helpless praying for life amidst the smog of the factory air. When she came to know that her dear tree too to be uprooted for setting up a center of 'Adult TV', Bristi could not remain silent. She

cried in protest. Neither her mother Nirmala, nor her grandfather could console her. As in the story goes,

“Her cries of protest and helpless rage rent the air. Nirmala came to her and tried to explain how they would now have access to numerous international channels and be able to watch the latest international movies. But Bristi's wail did not stop and finally, Nirmala left the room, leaving a heartbroken Bristi to herself.”

She began to wail in utmost grief. She thought,

"How greatly the tree must have suffered as its branches were sawn away. And the bird's nests, how many of those were destroyed? Where were the bird's now? Where were they sheltering for the night? Would they seek shelter in their cactus pots or dwarf ornamental bonsais?"

In the above lines Hussain has critiqued the mechanical urban lifestyle of people where people prefer to keep ornamental plants than real flowers or plants. 'Cactus pots' perhaps means desert like situation where freshness is hardly available. Bristi was concerned over the future of those uprooted trees and shelter less birds.

In the story we also hear the voice of nature through the aged tree. Once Bristi had a dream when she woke up, she met with a mysterious green being whose voice resembled her grandfather's. Bristi was informed by the being that it was the old soul of the tree beside her window. The soul was in utter distress, in utmost fear and anxiety due to deforestation activity at their place. The tree told her about violence done against his sons by people. The tree began to sob while narrating the tales to Bristi, telling her about his shattered dreams for life. Bristi was amazed by the sensitivity of the tree soul. She tried to assure her that the tree would be alive.

In the story the writer has referred to environmental changes following urbanization and industrialization. For instance, when the narrator mentioned Bristi's childhood days at Nambor, the environment was quite different. Bristi, at the age of four was brought to her grandfather's home at Nambor, a place which had once been a large forest, rich in flora and fauna, a veritable storehouse of wildlife. During her days with her father, Bristi had visited the Zoo in Guwahati and had seen the one-horned rhinos, tiger, elephants, snakes and many more things. Sal, segun were among the valuable trees there. But things quite changed after long six years. The narrator describes about this change in this way,

Thick forest cover had made even the noon seem as dark as dusk. But now the greed of smugglers, surrendered terrorists and corrupt officials had taken such a toll on the forest that it retained none of its former glory. The large forest began to shrink each day.

The hungry elephants came to the streets in search of food. Here the writer has highlighted the fact that due to encroachment of places, the wildlife in Guwahati has been greatly affected. The Nambor forest which used to be a rich treasure of flora and fauna had been encroached by smugglers and others. The hot spring dried up too. The forest is being replaced by commercial centers. A multinational Columbia Plastics Ltd. is being set up at its place. Due to this establishment, there were two negative consequences: first, the use of machinery took over much of the work which was done manually earlier. Secondly, the encroachment of Nambor forest, deforestation and large-scale dissemination of plastic products in the markets. Thus, the writer has strongly critiqued the encroachment drive at Nambor and establishment of the Plastic manufacturing industry. Here you can also relate the context of the novel *Iyat Ekhan Aaranya Asil* written by Anuradha Sarma Pujari which was

published in 2019. This is a novel where the novelist has critiqued the encroachment and deforestation drive in the city of Guwahati. The book received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for the year 2021.

Indifference to stories:

Instead of watching foreign cartoons and films, Bristi preferred to listen to her grandfather's old, classic stories. Here, the writer has shown that children are no longer interested in old fables and classic tales. They are more mechanical and love to play outdoors. The neighbours of Grandfather did not have time for his old accounts and stories. In contrast to that Bristi was someone who lived through those stories. When grandfather fell ill due to asthma, she became deeply upset. With the growth of cities and urban areas, people and their lifestyles faced a massive transformation. People hardly find time to spend quality time with their family and friends. In the race for power, status and wealth people tend to forget their family and relationships. This aspect of mechanical lifestyle could be seen in the case of Bristi's mother, Nirmala, who after she was into a job became irresponsible towards her family. She came late from the office and could hardly manage time for her daughter, Bristi. As in the story,

Sometimes, Nirmala came to Bristi but only for brief spells. But now a days Bristi barely recognized her mother in this garishly clad, overly made-up woman who brought in with her the combined scent of foreign perfumes and wines."

It was because of such indifference on the part of her mother that Bristi remained lonely and ignored. Grandfather 's stories and her aged tree - she lived through all these.

Theme of Alienation and Nostalgia:

Theme of Alienation generally refers to loss of connection, search for identity, disillusionment and loss of belonging, rootlessness. In modernist literature alienation reflects on an individual's struggle in a rapidly transforming world. This sense of Alienation is often connected to feeling of nostalgia which means ecological grief caused by environmental changes. In the story such grief is experienced by Bristi who was quite upset to hear the news of Deforestation. The tree that Bristi adorned so much is personified in the story through a dream narrative where we listen to the voice and perspectives of the aging tree.

Stop to Consider

Solastalgia

Glenn Albrecht in his article "Solastalgia and the Creation of New Ways of Living" writes about the global transformation of place and the psychoterratic dis-ease which arises from a negative relation to one's home environment. Here negative relationship means 'loss of identity, loss of an endemic sense of place and a decline in well-being' (Albrecht, 217).

In the story "Encroach", Imran Hussain has incorporated this theme of Alienation and Nostalgia through the character Bristi. Bristi's sense of Alienation was a result of her distance from mother due to her mother's extremely busy lifestyle. Her only companion was her grandfather whose stories were her real moments. However, when he too fell ill, she had none to share her moments. The big old tree that she adorned so much was going to be uprooted. The grief of separation drained her thoughts and emotions and she became anxious. She had the feeling of loss and loneliness. When she came

to know that her dear tree would be uprooted, she was upset. The narrator writes,

Thus, she sat still late at night and then retired to bed, her food untouched. She had no appetite tonight. Her mother had not returned, since the evening, her grandfather too had not been keeping well...That's why there was no one to console Bristi and share her grief at this time.

In this context, Imran Hussain has used a dream narrative to the plot giving the story a metanarrative touch. In her dream she had two visions: one about her parents and the other about her grandfather. In the first vision she saw her mother snatching her mirror that she was holding and she ran after her mother till the factory gates. There she lost sight of her mother but she was surprised to see her father in white *pugree* sitting close to the chimney of that factory feeling forlorn and dejected. She called her father almost screaming and her father said in response to. But the voice was unintelligible and vague. Bristi ran in search of her father but she could not find him.

The above dream perhaps refers to Bristi's longing for her parents' company and support. She was lonely and ignored. Bristi's father worked for a company that was taken over by a multinational company as a result of which her father had lost his job along with other workers. The family was poor and after that jobless situation, Bristi's father could not live long. Once he went on a trip to his uncle's house to borrow money. There he was caught in an ethnic clash which claimed his life. He was mercilessly burnt alive.

Thus, the dream that Bristi had that night was nightmarish for her as she could not meet her parents and she felt at a loss. Here we also get the context that Bristi's life was deeply affected by the environmental changes around her. Massive urbanization following

deforestation was gradually transforming her surroundings and she was not able to cope with those unhealthy changes.

In the second part of her dream, Bristi saw her mother seated on a high tree branch flying colorful kites. Her grandfather asked her to come down from the factory chimney and she did accordingly. On the way down the chimney, she saw a noisy crowd below and one Mr. Rao chasing at her in anger. She wanted to scream but with no effect. She awoke in surprise. But as she was awake, she felt someone's presence beside her continuously sobbing and weeping. That was a mysterious presence with green and creeper-like hair and beard. Bristi finally came to know that she was talking to the soul of the aged tree who came to see her last time. During her conversation with the old tree soul, Bristi continued to console him, showed sympathy for him and assured him that they would meet even after death as another tree.

It is interesting to note here that the old aged tree was also feeling homeless and lonely when he heard about uprooting and replacing houses. In a magic realist way Imran Hussain has intertwined these two dream narratives to reflect on the psychological impact of such environmental changes on people. The trees too felt alienated. The old tree soul informed Bristi about how in a very cruel way his sons had been killed sparing only a few. The tree kept on telling her about endings and renewals, of joys and sorrows, of change and permanence. The tree man fell silent after midnight while telling his stories to Bristi. When she woke up, she saw a wild storm coming with patches of dark clouds. The old tree was in agony and pain, darkened in fear. Bristi was at a loss when she found her grandfather labouring to breathe. Her mother was not available for her help. To her surprise, when she came back from grandfather's room, the tree man was nowhere to be seen. The storm was indeed wild that took away her tree and her grandfather. She found her dear tree laid

uprooted, her grandfather lying motionless. She cried for her grandfather but with no response. When she hurried to her grandfather's place, she slipped down on the slimy spittle on the floor. This is how the story ends with a note of despondence and hopelessness. Bristi was feeling as lost as 'the birds of Jatinga' when she found her grandfather in a lifeless state. The story is a powerful criticism of industrialization and mechanical lifestyle. The story develops how innocence is being destroyed by mechanical processes. The wild storm, the blue sky turning smoky red and black are symbolically represented to show the vision of a diseased and dark future. As we go through the story it almost becomes clear that the dead tree and Bristi's grandfather was like one soul. Understanding of this aspect of the story further makes the story interesting and meaningful.

SAQ

1. Discuss the Plot and themes in Imran Hussain's "Encroach"

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2. Discuss Imran Hussain's "Encroach" as a contemporary environmental narrative.

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4.3.2 The Theoretical Context

The present story can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. As the story is composed in the contemporary context, you can address different issues such as social, environmental and political. The story raises concern over the growth of a mechanical society devoid of social responsibilities and ethics. The title of the story itself refers to this act of change and transformation in society. The problem is that such transformation is going against the people and environment. The story can be studied from an Eco critical perspective with special focus on its deconstruction narrative against Western notion of progress. People are getting deprived of their jobs due to the use of machinery. The establishment of industries have not only encroached large scale forests in the state, but also caused massive pollution. The story shows the impact of encroachment on children. The story beautifully narrated the relationship between little Bristi and her favorite tree, a bond of faith and care. Bristi's protest over felling of trees suggests the fact that Bristi is quite concerned about environmental degradation and crisis.

Stop to Consider

Ecocriticism:

According to the definition by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold From, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocriticism deals with an earth centric approach to literary studies. Such studies attempt to address questions concerning the concept of wilderness, effect of environmental crisis in humankind, representation of nature in literature etc.

4.3.3 Significance as a Short Story

Storytelling has been a popular human interest since time immemorial. From ancient Babylonian tales to Egyptian tales, from the didactic tales of the *Panchatantra* tales to the tales of the *Jataka*, short stories have travelled a long way.

In terms of structure, a short story follows a basic structure: Abrupt beginning (beginning in media res) , Brevity, Focus on a single plot with limited characters and a single setting, open endedness.

An abrupt beginning captures the attention of the readers while an open endedness leaves scopes for multiple interpretations for readers. Dialogues are important for the development of characters and the plot. A short story is shorter than a novel and generally deals with single effects. It often has a climax at a certain point. Despite its limited scope it is complete in itself.

If you go by the history of short stories as a genre in the Western context, you will find that it was not available or treated as a distinct genre before the nineteenth century. However, brief narratives were available in the form of anecdotes, short allegorical romances and fairy tales and short myths. In Europe, short narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer, Giovanni Boccaccio were quite famous. Through the middle of the twentieth century short stories began to emerge as popular brief narratives with writers like Frank O' Connor, Edgar Allan Poe. In the nineteenth century Nikolay Gogol, Hawthorne, E.T. Hoffman, Poe were called the 'Fathers' of the modern short story who combined the elements of 'tale' and 'sketch' in writing short stories. Two very important names in the history of short stories include Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner whose writings exhibit inclination towards traditional and mythical symbols and content. There were many French short story writers such as Henry James, Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet.

Russian writers, Nikolay Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov contributed to the genre in a significant way. In the twentieth century, with the emergence of writers like Franz Kafka, Luigi Pirandello, Jorge Luis Borges, short narrative fiction received a new dimension treatment. New techniques were explored and complex themes were incorporated.

Under the influence of such Western literary trends and theory, the genre of short story as a form began to emerge. In the realm of Assamese short stories Lakshminath Bezbarua's name comes to the forefront whose writings marked the beginning of a great era for Assamese literature. His writings are full of historical connotations, irony and humor. They offer strong commentary for social change and reformation. In the publication of short stories and the promotion of budding writers, the magazine Jonaki played a major role.

There were other magazines like Banhi, Awahan, Jayanti, and Ramdhenu significantly contributed by offering literary platforms to the writers during the Ramdhenu period in Assam. In the post-Ramdhenu period, the genre of short stories had a transformation experimenting with diverse political, socio- cultural themes, new forms and styles.

So far as contemporary trends are concerned, short stories are more concerned with the socio- cultural contexts and issues such as social inequalities, religious orthodoxies, violence, psychology of characters etc. and questions concerning human rights and environment. The local and the global find an interesting combination in such short stories. To name a few are Dr. Mamoni Raisom Goswami, Saurav Kumar Chaliha, Kamal Kumar Barman, Nirupama Borgohain, Nabakanta Barua, Mitra Phukan, Arup Kumar Datta and many others. In the present context, Imran Hussain is a popular name in the field of Assamese Short Stories. His

experimental writings, reformative zeal in the plot, lively characterization and rich symbolism have presented him as a promising Assamese short fiction writer. Hussain's writings examine the historical and the social context of the State and explores the journey of the characters towards self assertion against a complex traditional network. The stories are rich in folkloric and mythical content with a magic realist approach to the context. Imran Hussain is a new and strong voice in the postmodern context.

4.4 Literary Strategy and Language in "Encroach"

The story " Encroach" is a third person narration.

In the story "Encroach" we find the following literary strategies:

- **Simile:** Imran Hussain has extensively used simile and metaphors to express his narratives. The first sentence of the story has a simile (used for comparison).

"As a sunflower gazes up at the sun, Bristi too sits gazing at the huge, aged gnarled tree in their compound." Again, in the following sentence

"When she saw them at play outside, her heart fluttered like that of a bird with broken wings"

"Through the smog of the factory air, the tree looked like a man with hands raised in prayer."

- **Personification:** Personification means endowing human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract notions. In the story the huge, aged gnarled tree is addressed as Bristi's soulmate.
- **Use of Flashbacks:** Flashbacks refer to past scenes or events that connect to the main narrative. In the story " Encroach" the narrator uses this literary strategy to show the contrast

between the past and present. The environmental changes that happened after the deforestation at Nambor forest.

"It has been almost six years since that fateful day. Bristi was four years of age then."

- **Juxtaposition of ideas:** The narrator uses the past and the present in juxtaposition to reflect on the patterns of changes in Bristi's life.
- **Rhetorical questions:** "Perhaps the bird had been drenched in the rains. **How was it to know of acid rain?"**
- **Dream Vision:** Imran Hussain has used Dream Vision as a narrative strategy in his short stories to reflect on the plot.

A dream may be used by the narrator for symbolic representation, hinting at some future event. It creates its own surreal world adding a fantastic element to the plot. Dream visions were frequently found in Mediaeval literature such as in the ancient literary text "The Dream of the Rood".

In "Encroach", Hussain has used Bristi's dream as a strategy to reflect on her inner psychology, her sense of phobia concerning the uprooting of her old tree and sense of Alienation. Dreams can be symbolical as well as allegorical.

SAQ

1. Discuss the literary devices used in "Encroach" with special emphasis on his dream narrative.

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2. Comment on the storytelling techniques used by different short story writers in Assam.

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4.5 Characterization in the Story

Bristi: The whole story surrounds Bristi's family and her relationship with her environment. A lonely girl passing her days listening to her grandfather's stories and talking to her friend, an aged gnarled tree. After she lost her father, she was being ignored by her mother who was busy working in a company. As it has been mentioned, the story expresses Bristi's sense of alienation and phobia. She was quite concerned about the growing environmental degradation of her place due to deforestation. She was deeply worried when she heard about uprooting of her dear tree. Bristi's dream in the narrative allegorically presents her psychological crisis. In her dream, Bristi consoled the weeping tree when he expressed his grief over the cutting of trees. The conversation between Bristi and the tree is symbolic in the narrative which explains the close tie between the two.

Bristi's Parents: Bristi had a close association with her father who died a fatal death after losing his job following the establishment of a multinational company. Bristi's father actually became a victim of industrialization in the state. After his demise, Bristi was brought to her grandfather's house at Nambor. Bristi's mother, Nirya had no time for her as she kept herself busy in her own personal affairs. Bristi

had none but the companionship of her grandfather and the old gnarled tree.

Bristi's Grandfather: Bristi's Grandfather was lonely like her. He loved her very much and narrated stories of Vikram - Vetala, tales of Kamala Kuwori, Aesop's tales to her. Bristi was quite concerned over his ailing health, his asthma issue. She was frightened to think about the day when she would no longer be able to listen to him. Her grandfather was also being ignored by her mother. It was her grandfather who brought her family to Nambor after her father's sudden demise. Bristi came to know from her grandfather that once Nambor was a big forest with big sal and segun trees. But now the greed of the smugglers, surrendered terrorists and corrupt officials had encroached the land leaving no space for the trees and animals. It was her grandfather who consoled her when she cried over the news of uprooting the aged tree.

4.6 Summing Up

Imran Hussain's "Encroach" is not only significant as a contemporary short story, but also remarkable for its masterful blending of fact and fiction. Theoretically this story is a futuristic story about environmental degradation and ecological crisis. The narrative invites attention of people concerning deforestation and massive urbanization. After going through this story, you must attempt to explore the themes of the story under its cultural and environmental context.

4.7 Model Questions

1. Discuss Imran Hussain's narrative strategy in his story "Encroach".

2. What are the characteristics of a short story? Discuss the important features of the short story "Encroach".
3. Discuss Imran Hussain "Encroach" as a critique of Deforestation and globalisation.

4.8 References and Suggested Readings

Albrecht, Glenn. "Solastalgia and the Creation of New Ways of Living" in Pilgrim, Sarah & Jules Pretty(eds.). *Nature and Culture: Rebuilding Lost Connections*. London & New York: Routledge, 2013

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Unit-5

Mamang Dai : An Introduction

Unit Structure:

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 About the Author
- 5.4 Mamang Dai's Literary Contribution
- 5.5 Prominent Works
- 5.6 Honours and Recognition
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References and Suggested Readings

5.1 Objectives

After going through this Unit, the learner will be able to-

- *learn* about the life and work of Mamang Dai,
- *assess* the literary contributions of Mamang Dai,
- *prepare* yourself with background study necessary for the reading of *The Black Hill*.

5.2 Introduction

Mamang Dai is one of the most renowned and celebrated poets and novelists from Arunachal Pradesh, a Northeastern state in India. She was born into the Adi community and tremendously contributed to promote her indigenous heritage and the cultural variations of her native region through her literary endeavours. She has made significant contributions to Indian literature in English, offering a unique perspective on the experiences, traditions, and challenges of the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Along with being a writer, Mamang Dai is also known for her pioneering work in

journalism as well as her active contribution in environmental conservation.

5.3 About the Author

Mamang Dai is a distinguished Indian writer and poet from Arunachal Pradesh, renowned for her poignant and evocative literary works. She was born on February 29, 1957, in Pasighat, East Siang district, in Arunachal Pradesh. She belongs to the Adi tribe, a prominent indigenous community in the region. She did her schooling at Pine Mount School in Shillong, Meghalaya. She opted for a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Gauhati University, Assam.

As a renowned Indian poet and novelist, Mamang Dai has left an indelible mark on the literary landscape of North East India. Her literary compositions encompass a diverse range of genres, including poetry, novels, and non-fiction works. Her writings serve as a platform to promote the disappearing traditions of Arunachal Pradesh, while giving voice to its people through innovative storytelling. Dai has actively participated in various national and international forums worldwide, tirelessly advocating for the preservation of the cultural identity of her community. She had been a significant member of the North East Writers' Forum (NEWF), known for vehemently promoting the cultural heritage and literary traditions of Arunachal Pradesh.

Not only did Dai made pioneering achievement as an author, but she is also known for being the first woman from Arunachal Pradesh to be selected for the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1979. However, she did not opt for a career in the civil service but rather chose to pursue journalism. Her journalistic career spanned several esteemed publications, including *The Hindustan Times*, *The*

Telegraph, and *The Sentinel*. Later, she went on to serve as the President of the Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists. She is also known for her notable works as an anchor and interviewer at TV-AIR and DDK, in Itanagar.

Mamang Dai has also been actively involved in environmental conservation. She was associated with the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) which facilitated her participation in the Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots programme, thus contributing to the preservation of the region's unique biodiversity. Presently, she serves as the General Secretary of the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society. She is also a General Council member of the Sahitya and Sangeet Natak Akademi, a prestigious national academy that promotes literature, music, dance, and drama. Mamang Dai's remarkable journey as a writer, an artist, and a conservationist, is marked by her pioneering spirit, literary excellence, and commitment to preserving the cultural heritage of her community.

5.4 Mamang Dai's literary contribution

Mamang Dai's extensive literary oeuvre encompasses a diverse range of genres, including novels, poetry, non-fiction, and illustrated folklore. Her notable works include *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2008), *River Poems* (2004), *Midsummer – Survival Lyrics* (2014), *El bálsamo del tiempo (The Balm of Time)* (2008), *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003), *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal* (2004), *The Sky Queen, Once Upon a Moon Time* (2003), *Hambreelmai's Loom* (2014), and *The Black Hill* (2014).

Dai's poetic oeuvre includes *River Poems*, a notable poetry collection that showcases her literary genius, establishing her as a unique poetic voice from the region. Her other significant poetry

collections include *The Balm of Time*, *Hambreelmai's Loom*, and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. Her collection, *Midsummer-Survival Lyrics*, is one of her most significant work which solidifies her position as a prominent poet in contemporary Indian literature.

Dai's poetry is notable for its lyricism, which is deeply rooted in the landscapes of her native Arunachal Pradesh. Her poems often evoke the majestic beauty of the region's rivers, forests, and mountains, which are imbued with a sense of mystery and myth. As Dai writes, "the river has a soul"—it suggests a profound reverence for the natural world which is deeply intertwined with the cultural and spiritual practices of the region. However, beneath the surface of her lyrical descriptions of nature lies a more sinister undertow, one that is marked by the presence of "guns and gulls" (Dai). This juxtaposition of the natural world with the violence of human conflict serves as a powerful commentary on the fragility of life in the region.

One of the key strengths of Dai's poetry is its ability to balance simplicity with depth. Her poems often unfold as gentle, meandering reflections on the natural world, replete with imagery that is at once vivid and understated. Her poetic language is characterized by a gentle, persuasive quality which is evident in poems such as "Small Towns and the River". The closing lines of the poem, "In small towns by the river/ we all want to walk with the gods" (Dai), serve as a powerful testimony to the human desire for transcendence. Dai's poetry can be seen as a form of resistance, one that challenges the dominant narratives of Indian literature. As a poet from the Northeast, Dai's work serves as a powerful counterpoint to the more dominant voices of Indian literature. Her poetry offers a unique perspective on the Indian experience, one that is rooted in the cultural and geographical specificities of the North-east.

In addition to her poetry, Dai has written novels, as well as prose and stories for children. Dai's non-fiction works include *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* and *Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal*, which provide valuable insights into the state's history, culture, and cuisine. Her non-fiction work, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, is a documentation of the rich cultural heritage, folklore, and the customs of her native state, providing valuable insights into the region's vibrant traditions. Her illustrated folklore texts, such as *The Sky Queen* and *Once Upon a Moontime*, showcase her ability to preserve and promote the rich cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh.

Dai's fiction writing career began with the publication of her first novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, in 2006. This was followed by *Stupid Cupid* in 2008, *The Black Hill* in 2014, and *Escaping the Land* in 2021. Her novels often explore themes of identity, community, and the human relationship with the environment. Throughout her writing career, Dai's thematic focus has shifted from the personal to the communal. Her early work was characterized by romantic verse and stories, but she later transitioned to exploring the complexities of community life, thus reflecting on her deep connection to the people and places of Arunachal Pradesh.

Check Your Progress

Write about some of the traits of Mamang Dai's writing. (200 words)

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5.5 Prominent works

Let us discuss some of Mamang Dai's most prominent works in detail:

1. *The Legends of Pensam* (2006)

Mamang Dai's novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, is a captivating narrative that blends myth and history, offering a unique glimpse into the cultural heritage of the Adi tribe of the Siang valley. Spanning across Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, this work is an attestation to Dai's skill as a storyteller and her deep understanding of the tribal customs and beliefs of her people. Through this novel, Dai seeks to preserve the oral traditions of her community, which are increasingly threatened by the forces of modernization. By documenting some of the most gripping tribal lore, Dai aims to safeguard the cultural identity of the Adi people, providing an enriching glimpse into their rich cultural heritage.

The concept of "pensam" is central to the narrative, referring to the middle ground between myth and reality, as well as the transitional phase between traditional and modern ways of life. Dai's use of this concept highlights the fluidity of cultural boundaries and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. The novel's narrative structure is characterized by a non-linear, episodic approach, which mirrors the oral storytelling traditions of the Adi people. The story begins with the legend of Hoxo, a boy who falls from the sky and is adopted by the tribe. This narrative thread is woven throughout the novel, which explores themes of identity, community, and cultural change.

Through a series of interconnected stories spanning multiple generations, Dai explores the intricate relationships between the natural world, spirits, and human experience in the novel, *The Legends of Pensam*. The novel highlights the significance of

animistic faith in the Adi culture, where the natural world is imbued with spiritual agency. The characters' lives are influenced by spirits, shamans, and supernatural events, which are often seen as manifestations of displeased nature or spirits. The narrative illustrates how the Adi people attribute unexpected events, such as unnatural deaths, strange illnesses, and fires, to the malign influence of spirits or the failure to perform certain rites. The role of shamans in the Adi community is particularly noteworthy. As spiritual practitioners, they possess the power to exorcise malevolent spirits and restore balance to the lives of community members.

The narrative also explores themes of cultural identity, tradition, and the impact of external forces on indigenous communities. The Siang valley, with its majestic mountains, rivers, and rain, serves as a vivid backdrop for the story, immersing the reader in the rich cultural heritage of the Adi tribe. Dai's work provides a valuable insight into the cultural practices and beliefs of the Adi people, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds. The novel demonstrates how the Adi community's traditional knowledge and practices are closely tied to their ecological context, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of indigenous cultures and their relationships with the environment.

Mamang Dai's novel, *The Legends of Pensam*, not only explores the cultural traditions and beliefs of the Adi people but also provides a historical account of the colonial encounter in the tribal area of Arunachal Pradesh. The narrative recounts the events surrounding the 1911 expedition of British political officer Noel Williamson, who was tasked with exploring the course of the river Siang flowing through Adi territory. Williamson's mission ended in tragedy when he was struck down by an angry Adi in the village of Komsing. The aftermath of this event saw the British launch a punitive expedition, known as the Abor expedition, in 1912. The expedition aimed to

capture the culprits and banish them to the Andaman Islands. A memorial stone to Williamson was erected in Komsing, serving as a lasting reminder of the colonial encounter. The presence of foreigners (migluns) in the area became increasingly common after the Abor expedition, marking the beginning of a new era of colonial administration in the Siang valley. Dai's novel provides a dynamic exploration of the historical context of colonialism in the region, shedding light on the complex interactions between the Adi people and the British colonial authorities.

The novel also explicitly explores the complexities of love, loss, and cultural identity. One of the stories revolves around Nenem, a young woman whose beauty attracts the attention of David, a British officer posted in the region. Their romance blossoms, but ultimately ends in separation when David is transferred elsewhere, leaving Nenem behind. However, Nenem, though heartbroken, comes to gracefully accept the realities of life. Nenem's philosophical acceptance of her fate, as evident in her statement, "No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own," underscores her resilience and agency.

The Legends of Pensam is a significant contribution to Indian literature, providing a unique perspective on the cultural traditions and experiences of indigenous communities in the Northeast region. Dai's work challenges dominant narratives and provides a platform for marginalized voices to be heard. *The Legends of Pensam* is a testimonial to Dai's skill as a storyteller and her ability to craft a compelling narrative that resonates with readers.

2. *The Sky Queen* (2003)

Mamang Dai's *The Sky Queen* is a compelling narrative that delves into the mythology of the indigenous Adi community. The story revolves around Nyanyi Myete, a celestial being who floats down

from the sky and becomes the guardian of the lost civilization of Kojum-Koja. The narrative begins with the description of Kojum-Koja, a thriving civilization that celebrates numerous festivals, each accompanied by hunting and fishing expeditions. However, their prosperity is short-lived, as they ignore the warnings of their elders and consume the forbidden Biri Angur Potung, the son of Biri Bote, the monarch of the Water Kingdom. This act of disobedience triggers a catastrophic war between Kojum-Koja and the Water Kingdom, resulting in the destruction of the former. Nyanyi Myete, the celestial aunt of Kojum-Koja, survives the deluge and becomes the sole custodian of the lost civilization's cultural heritage. She is depicted as a kind-hearted being who spreads joy and happiness among all living creatures, from birds and animals to humans. Her presence is celebrated by the Adi people, who commemorate her arrival from the sky through annual festivities. Nyanyi Myete, as the guardian of Kojum-Koja's lost heritage, ensures the continuation of their songs, dances, and traditions. Her role underscores the importance of cultural memory and the need to preserve the stories and legends of the past. Nyanyi Myete's portrayal can also be seen as a significant representation of the feminine principle in Adi mythology. The story features a range of supernatural elements, including the celestial Nyanyi Myete, the Water Kingdom, and the forbidden Biri Angur Potung. These elements highlight the significance of nature and the supernatural in Adi mythology, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the human and natural worlds.

One of the major themes of the narrative is cultural preservation and transmission as the story highlights the importance of preserving cultural heritage and traditions. Nyanyi Myete's role as the guardian of Kojum-Koja's lost heritage underscores the need to protect and transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

Feminine power and agency is another significant theme of the book. Nyanyi Myete's character represents the feminine principle in Adi mythology, emphasizing the significance of women in Adi cultural heritage. Her kindness, compassion, and nurturing qualities are quintessential attributes of the feminine, highlighting the significance of women in Adi cultural heritage and the importance of feminine values in maintaining social harmony. Another important theme of the story is disobedience which can be allegorically related to the biblical story of disobedience. The Kojum-Koja's decision to ignore the warnings of their elders and consume the forbidden Biri Angur Potung leads to their downfall, serving as a cautionary tale about the importance of respecting tradition and authority. The narrative also explores the theme of loss and memory, particularly in the context of cultural heritage. The destruction of Kojum-Koja and the loss of their civilization serve as a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural memory and tradition. Finally, the story offers a message of redemption and renewal. Despite the destruction of Kojum-Koja, Nyanyi Myete's presence ensures the continuation of their cultural heritage, offering a sense of hope and renewal for the future. *The Sky Queen* is a rich and complex narrative that offers insights into Adi mythology and cultural heritage. Nyanyi Myete's character serves as a powerful symbol of cultural preservation, transmission, and the feminine principle. This literary narrative is a valuable addition to the corpus of Indian mythology and folklore as it provides a unique perspective on the cultural traditions of the Adi people.

3. *Once Upon a Moontime* (2003)

Mamang Dai's *Once Upon a Moontime* is a captivating collection of folktales from Arunachal Pradesh, skillfully woven together to create a rich tapestry of stories that explore the origins of the natural world. In the form of a picture book, illustrated by Nimret Handa,

the book exhibits Dai's ability to craft compelling narratives that seamlessly blend fantasy, magic, and reality. Through these stories, Dai offers a unique perspective on the natural world and our place within it. Her use of imagery and symbolism adds depth and complexity to the narratives.

The collection comprises four stories, each of which offers a unique perspective on the creation myths of the Adi people. The first story, "How the World was Made", recounts the tale of two brothers in the sky, Lopong Rimbuche and Chom Dande, who decide to create human beings on earth. However, the earth is entirely covered in water, prompting the brothers to seek the help of winds from the four quarters. The winds bring dust of different hues, which the brothers mix together and shape into mountains and valleys. This narrative serves as a testament to the Adi people's deep connection with the natural world and their understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings.

The second story, "The Story of the River", is a delightful tale about the origins of the Lohit River, a sacred waterway that flows through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. According to the myth, the river was born with the collaborative efforts of various supernatural beings, including Techimdum, the god of the underworld, and a host of animals and insects, such as crabs, ants, and a wild cat, who worked together to facilitate its course. The story demonstrates the importance of collaboration and perseverance in overcoming obstacles as well as the need of cooperation and mutual respect in achieving a common goal.

The third story, "Why the Dove Weeps," offers a poignant explanation for the dove's mournful cry. According to the myth, the dove was once the caretaker of the sun god's son but was forced to remain on earth after a tragic accident. This narrative serves as a

powerful metaphor for the consequences of fate and the enduring power of love and longing.

The final story, “The Sun and the Moon,” recounts the tale of the creation of the sun and how the moon came into being. The narrative tells the story of two suns, one good and one bad, and their struggles for dominance. This myth serves as a compelling illustration of the Adi people’s understanding of the delicate balance between light and darkness, good and evil. According to the myth, the moon was created by the gods to provide light for the world, thus highlighting the importance of lustre, radiance, and illumination in our lives.

The interconnectedness of all living beings forms a dominant theme in the collection. The narratives highlight the interconnectedness of humans, animals, the natural, and the supernatural world. The stories demonstrate how the actions of one being can impact others and the environment, emphasizing the importance of cooperation and mutual respect. The collection also explores the delicate balance between light and darkness, good and evil, and chaos and order. The stories illustrate the consequences of disrupting this balance and the importance of maintaining harmony in the world. The tale narrating “The Story of the River” emphasizes the importance of cooperation and collaboration in achieving a common goal. The narrative demonstrates how collective effort and mutual respect can lead to the creation of something beautiful and life-giving. The collection explores the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds. The stories feature a range of supernatural beings, including gods, goddesses, and spirits, highlighting the Adi people’s understanding of the intricate connections between the human and natural worlds. The narrative “Why the Dove Weeps” serves as a powerful metaphor for the consequences of fate and explores the themes of love, loss, and longing. The story highlights the idea that

individual actions can have far-reaching consequences that shape one's destiny. The narratives touch on the themes of impermanence and transformation, illustrating how change is an inherent part of life. The stories demonstrate how individuals and communities must adapt to changing circumstances and find ways to transform and renew themselves.

Once Upon a Moontime offers a fascinating glimpse into the cosmogonic narratives of the Adi people. Through these stories, Dai provides a unique perspective on the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh, highlighting the importance of cooperation, mutual respect, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. *Once Upon a Moontime* validates the rich cultural heritage of the Adi people. The collection preserves and celebrates the community's traditional stories, myths, and legends, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation and transmission.

4. *The Black Hill* (2014)

Mamang Dai's novel, *The Black Hill*, is a historical fiction set in 1840s and 1850s Arunachal Pradesh. The narrative offers a subtle exploration of the complex dynamics of colonialism, cultural encounter, and indigenous identity. The narrative is situated in a liminal space, where the British colonial empire and the Chinese authority in Tibet are vying for influence, while the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh are struggling to maintain their autonomy and cultural heritage.

The narrative revolves around two main characters: Father Nicolas Krick, a French pastor, and Gimur, a young woman from the Abor tribe of Mebo village. Father Krick's arrival in Arunachal Pradesh is motivated by his ambition to spread Christianity and establish a mission in Southern Tibet. Through the characters of Father Krick and Gimur, Dai masterfully explores the tensions and contradictions

that arise when different cultural worlds collide. Father Nicolas Krick represents the complexities of colonialism and the missionary impulse. His determination to spread Christianity in Tibet is driven by a deep sense of conviction and purpose. However, his character also raises important questions about the ethics of proselytization and the impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures.

The novel highlights the importance of indigenous perspectives and voices in the narrative of colonialism. By centering Gimur's story and experiences, Dai challenges the dominant narratives of colonialism, which often privilege the perspectives of colonial powers. Instead, *The Black Hill* offers a composite and multifaceted exploration of the colonial encounter, one that acknowledges the agency and autonomy of indigenous communities. Gimur represents the indigenous perspective, which is characterized by a deep connection to the land, culture, and community. Her bold and carefree nature is reflective of the agency and autonomy that indigenous women have historically exercised in their communities. However, Gimur's world is rapidly changing, as the threat of British colonialism looms large, and the fear of cultural erasure and displacement hangs heavy in the air. Gimur, the shy but feisty girl, is a paradigmatic example of female agency and autonomy in the face of patriarchal norms. Her decision to marry the love of her life, despite the taboos and opposition from her tribe, underscores her determination and courage. Gimur's character subverts the traditional tropes of feminine passivity and obedience, offering a distinct portrayal of women's lives in 19th-century Arunachal Pradesh.

Kajinsha, a young and brave warrior, is another significant character in the novel, *The Black Hill*. He embodies the complexities of indigenous leadership and resistance in the face of colonialism. His desire to unite the rival tribes against the British is motivated by a

deep sense of loyalty to his land and community. Kajinsha's character highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity, as he navigates the challenges of colonialism while remaining committed to his cultural heritage.

The characterization in *The Black Hill* is a significant aspect of the novel's narrative, offering a complex and intricate exploration of human experience in 19th-century Arunachal Pradesh. Dai's characters are a testament to the complexity and diversity of human experience, and their stories continue to resonate with readers today. The novel's characterization is also significant for its representation of indigenous perspectives and voices, which are often marginalized or silenced in dominant narratives of colonialism. Dai's writing style is characterized by its lyricism and simplicity, making the narrative feel more like a folk tale than a historical account.

Throughout the novel, Dai skillfully weaves a narrative that is characterized by an underlying sense of foreboding and unease. The reader is gradually immersed in a world of colonialism, displacement, and cultural erasure, which serves to heighten the sense of gloom and despair. The tone of gloom that pervades *The Black Hill* serves as a powerful commentary on the devastating impact of colonialism on indigenous communities. Dai's narrative substantiates the enduring legacy of colonialism, which continues to shape the lives of people living in and around its former colonies. Through its exploration of themes such as displacement, cultural erasure, and resistance, *The Black Hill* offers a thought-provoking examination of the complexities of colonialism and its ongoing impact on contemporary society. Dai's prose is masterful in its ability to evoke a sense of desolation and loss, leaving the reader with a profound sense of contemplation and reflection.

The novel, *The Black Hill*, offers a powerful exploration of the complexities of colonialism, the politics of cultural encounter, and

indigenous identity in 19th-century Arunachal Pradesh. Dai's masterful storytelling and nuanced characterization make this novel a compelling read for scholars and readers alike. The novel provides a poignant portrayal of the impact of colonialism on the lives of people living in and around its colonies. Through the experiences of its characters, Dai sheds light on the far-reaching consequences of colonialism, including cultural displacement, social upheaval, and economic exploitation. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the need to acknowledge and learn from the past, in order to build a more equitable and just future. Dai's writing is evocative and descriptive, conjuring vivid images of the natural landscape and the people who inhabit it.

Check Your Progress

Write a note on the major literary works of Mamang Dai. (250 words)

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5.6 Honours and Recognition

Mamang Dai has been honoured with numerous accolades and recognition for her contribution to literature:

- In 2011, she was conferred the prestigious Padma Shri award by the Government of India, recognizing her outstanding achievements in the field of literature and education.

- Dai's non-fiction work, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, was honoured with the annual Verrier Elwin Prize in 2013 by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. This award acknowledges exceptional literary works that promote cross-cultural understanding and highlight the rich cultural heritage of the region.
- In addition, Dai's novel, *The Black Hill*, earned her the esteemed Sahitya Akademi Award in 2017. This prominent literary honour is bestowed by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters, to recognize outstanding literary works in various Indian languages.

Throughout her career, Mamang Dai has demonstrated a profound commitment to exploring the cultural, social, and historical landscape of India's Northeast region. Her literary contributions have significantly enriched the Indian literary landscape, offering unique perspectives on the region's rich cultural heritage.

5.7 Summing Up

Mamang Dai is a multifaceted writer and literary figure who has made significant contributions to Indian literature and culture. Her literary career is a testament to her dedication to preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh. Her diverse body of work has significantly contributed to the literary landscape of India, offering valuable insights into the region's history, culture, and environment. Mamang Dai's works, especially poetry, offers a profound meditation on the human condition, which is deeply rooted in the natural world. Her poems often allude to the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the fraught relationships between indigenous cultures and the dominant discourse. Her work not only reflects her deep connection to her indigenous heritage but also

highlights the rich cultural diversity of Arunachal Pradesh and the broader Northeastern region of India. Her literary compositions serve as a powerful testimony to the importance of marginalized voices in Indian literature, offering a unique perspective of experiences of the people, especially from the north-east region of India.

5.8 References and Suggested Readings

Dai, Mamang. *River Poems*. Writers Workshop, 2004.

--- "Small Towns and River". *River Poems*, Writers Workshop, 2004.

--- *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

--- *Once Upon a Moontime*. Illustrated by Nimret Handa. Katha, 1 January, 2007.

--- *The Sky Queen*. Illustrated by Srivi. Katha, 1 January, 2004.

--- *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Unit-6

Mamang Dai: *The Black Hill*

Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Summary and Analysis of *The Black Hill*
- 6.4 Analysis of Important Characters
- 6.5 Themes and Techniques
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 References and Suggested Readings

6.1 Objectives

By the end of this unit, the learner will be able to-

- *write* about the plot and important characters in the novel,
- *understand* the text with critical insights and interpretations,
- *analyse* the themes and techniques,
- *critically* explain the novel.

6.2 Introduction

Mamang Dai is one of the most influential literary voices from Arunachal Pradesh, India. Her works are celebrated for their deep rootedness in the culture, traditions, and landscapes of the region. A versatile writer, Dai's oeuvre spans journalism, poetry, fiction, and popular non-fiction. Her literary imagination draws extensively on the oral traditions and mythic worldviews of India's Northeast, often illuminating stories from the margins—those that speak of the fantastic, the mysterious, and the unexplored. Dai's writing gives voice to the experiences and heritage of the indigenous communities

of Arunachal Pradesh, especially the Adi people of the Siang Valley. It is important to note that Arunachal Pradesh is a culturally rich and diverse region, home to multiple communities with distinct customs and traditions. Dai's work reflects this complexity, presenting a nuanced portrayal of the region and its people.

This unit introduces learners to the key aspects of Mamang Dai's novel *The Black Hill*. It provides a brief overview of the story, followed by a detailed synopsis and analysis to support a deeper engagement with the text. A concise description of the principal characters is also included to help readers better follow the narrative. The unit further explores the major themes and narrative techniques employed by Dai, enabling the learner to appreciate the craft and cultural depth of the novel.

6.3 Summary and Analysis of *The Black Hill*

Mamang Dai's novel *The Black Hill* is based on the true events that happened in the middle of the 19th century when two French priests were murdered by the locals in Arunachal Pradesh. The narrative focuses on the lives of Gimur, an Abor girl, and Kajinsha, a Mishmi chief, who are lovers. In the prologue, the narrator sets the tone of the story. It states that the truth of the story is in the hands of the readers, as the narrative does not lay claim to historical authenticity. Thus, the narrator states that what matters most is love and memories—which the story actually justifies.

The novel begins in a very tumultuous period for the Abor people, who are afraid and unaccustomed to the intentions of their newly introduced white neighbours from Assam. The story illustrates how the East India Company is trying very hard to build connections with the tribes of the land in order to expand their territory. The Abor and Mishmi people, on the other hand, are sceptical of the

British's intentions. They fear that they might lose their territory under the colonial power, and hence there have already been a few conflicts between the two sides. In the story, we see multiple tribes coming together to discuss the immediate threat of "the miglun." An old woman called Moi tells Gimur and Lendem about the intentions of the British, as she has lived with them a short while in the past. It is during the days of such meetings that Gimur sees Kajinsha. Gimur is a spirited girl from the Abor village of Mebo. She is introduced as a young Abor girl who is curious, energetic, and full of life. She lives with only one parent, her mother, as her father passed away suddenly when she was still a child. Her brief meeting with Kajinsha shifts the narrator to focus on the history of his family. Kajinsha's father was a clan chief who travelled with his family and people to find a safe place. He travelled to the Zayul Valley and settled with their Tibetan neighbours. Kajinsha's father hated the British and, with Khampti rebels, he conjured a surprise attack on the British. In this scuffle, he was fatally injured and succumbed to death. After his father's death, Kajinsha has lived a life full of struggle and serious duties.

Each of the chapters in the novel are divided in the years in which they are imagined to have happened. In the chapter concerning the year 1850, we see that the summer days have arrived and all the members of the tribes are busy in their fields. In the rainy days, there is no fear of an imminent attack because it is very difficult to climb the hills. Gimur worked very hard in the fields and she spent the nights in the small shelter called "ippo". It is during these days that Gimur starts to fall in love with Kajinsha. He comes to her small hut in the field and they both spend the nights together. Only Nago, Gimur's friend, knows about the secret affair. The chapter also reveals the preparations of Father Nicolas Krick. He, along with Julien Rabin and Louis Bernard, starts his journey for Madras on 23

December, 1849. The missionaries' team was selected for a South Tibetan mission. They arrive in Madras on 26 April, 1850 and after spending some time in Calcutta, they head for Gowhattee. Their first impression of the land is that "as though they had entered a strange and desolate place at the end of the earth" (Dai 41). The two stories run parallelly as the novel develops.

In the next chapter, we see Gimur pregnant with the child of Kajinsha. She decides to speak with her mother about her clandestine love affair, but after a dispute with her friend Lendem, she decides not to speak to her. Here, the readers are introduced to the internal world of tribes and how they are microcosms of a world completed within. The narrator states that "Abor villages were secure enclaves where the rules of tradition were never crossed. Inter-tribe relationships were a betrayal to the community and girls marrying outsiders were spurned, useless like mustard seed scattered to the winds" (Dai 45–46). Meanwhile, we see Father Krick preparing his adventure to find if there is a possible way to Lassa (Tibet) from the far eastern end of Assam, through Abor and Mishmi areas. Gimur decides to leave her village and elopes with Kajinsha to his home in Zayul valley near the Tibet border. The two lovers go through a difficult journey, crossing sloppy hills and meandering rivers in their path. When they finally arrive at Kajinsha's place, they meet Zumsha, a clan chief. Gimur is welcomed in their traditional way. The readers are described how Kajinsha is maintaining his relations with his other wife Auli. Kajinsha also has a son named Awesa.

As the novel develops, we see an intersection of paths of the major characters in the novel. The lives of Kajinsha, Krick, and Gimur are interconnected through the unexplainable work of fate. Father Krick travels to Zayul Valley and Tibet with the help of Chowsa and Lamet. He stays for more than a month in Sommeu, but he is

ordered by the governor from Rima to return immediately. He leaves Sommeu in February 1852, and when he camps near the area where Kajinsha's home belongs, the two men start to meet and exchange valuable thoughts, insights on their lives, and both are intrigued. There is a strange connection that forms between the two.

When Krick meets Gimur, he is mesmerised by her. For no reason, it seems Krick establishes a divine connection with her that is pure and platonic. The narrative describes his feelings as follows:

He was wonderstruck. For no accountable reason he felt a great sense of joy and gratitude that he was able to enter this house. Peace be in the house. God bless them, God bless this house! He cried in his heart... If Krick could think of himself as a shepherd with his flock he knew that this house and she, the woman of the house, would be the one whom he would watch over. (Dai 144-145)

Gimur, on the other hand, looks cautiously at the priest. Her curiosity is balanced by being a careful observer of his activities. She is intrigued by the priest's determination. Later, she also meets him in Mebo. When Gimur realises that Kajinsha has been dishonest with her, she leaves him and journeys towards her old home with Awesa. She takes her child Siengbow with her, but he dies on the path. During her stay in Mebo, Krick becomes popular among the tribe people as a medicine man. However, he is forced to leave the place as distrust rises against him.

It is when Krick returns to Sommeu for the second time with Augustin Bourry that things start to fall apart. Gimur is persuaded by Kajinsha to return to Zayul Valley. Things in their life start to go well when Marpa and Lamet conceive a plan to murder Krick. The tension between the inter-tribal groups has already been escalated by the presence of Krick and his companion. Kajinsha tries to warn

them, but he never gets to talk with Krick, whom he calls his friend. In a plot conjured by Auli's uncle Marpa, Krick is brutally murdered. He breathes his last in the presence of Gimur, whom he sees as 'aenjal' (Dai 246).

Kajinsha is accused of the murder and he is brought into prison in Debrooghur (Dibrugarh). Gimur visits his cell secretly but gets caught by a prison guard, and in the tussle, she kills the guard. Kajinsha bids farewell to Gimur as he becomes certain of his fate. In the last meeting, Kajinsha urges Gimur to tell their tale and preserve, beyond distortions of the authorities, their truths.

The novel highlights the region's complex politics as it is constantly provoked by the change brought by the colonial forces. In these difficult times, we see a story emerge where love, myth, tribal politics, colonial powers, and different faiths collide to change the course of history. While the love story of Gimur and Kajinsha foregrounds the internal politics and inter-tribal rivalries, Krick's presence in the Abor and Mishmi lands is seen as a threat. Although Krick's intentions were benign, his presence and popularity are perceived as a danger to the tribal way of life. The novel, which expands from 1847 to the late 1850s, explores issues such as love, identity, tribal politics, and the expansion of the British Empire. Dai also takes careful notice of nature's unavoidable presence in the lives of the people living in India's Northeast. She delineates a realistic picture of how harsh life can be in the valley and along the banks of the Brahmaputra River.

The story is nuanced and has many layers of meaning. Each chapter is important because Mamang Dai dives deep into the cultural and political scenario of the hills. To understand the nature of myths (which are referenced throughout the text), as well as the culture and traditions of the tribes, a selective summary is not enough. A true sense of the narrative can only be gained through a complete reading

of the text. *The Black Hill* represents, in the truest sense, the undocumented histories of the land and imagines a story that is based on colonial history. In a way, one can say that Dai has tried to fill a gap in history—a history that was devoid of emotions and only a record of data—with a powerful story.

Check Your Progress

From your reading of the text, explain how the relation develops between Kajinsha, a Mishmi tribal chief, and Krick, a priest. (100 words)

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6.4 Analysis of Important Characters

Dai's novel features many important characters, some of which are directly taken from the chapters of history. The novel takes place in the crucial time-frame of India's history when the efforts of colonial expansion were at their pinnacle. Hence, we find mention of the British officials who helped Krick and his associates find a way to the Abor and Mishmi hills. Some of the important foreign figures from history that are mentioned in the novel are Nicolas Krick, Julien Rabin, Louis Bernard, Major Francis Jenkins, Archbishop Farrell, Thomas Oliffe, Hamilton Vetch etc. There are also native characters who play important role in the plot like Lamet, Yenjee, Marpa, Awesa, Zumsha, Nago, Moi, Lengdem etc. However, since there are many characters in the novel, we will only focus on important characters who are fully developed in the narrative and discuss their crucial roles in the novel. The first major character, in

this regard, is the Priest Nicolas Michel Krick. He was born in Lorraine, France. He was ordained in 1844 and it was a time of sweeping changes both in France and in the world. The colonial powers in Asia had a good grip over the region and hence the footprints of Christianity had also expanded with the zeal to reach more territories. The narrative states that:

Nicolas Krick might have felt this pull like many young men who were leaving their French parishes to serve in remote foreign missions... Day by day, every hour of prayer was a preparation of voyage, a tidying up of things, a constant farewell to the grounds, tender flowers and green grass of his home, a strengthening resolve to travel out in the name of God- to live another life 'over there'. (Dai 15)

Krick is portrayed in the novel as a very ambitious character who is adamant and resolved when it comes to dedication towards his faith. His journey towards Tibet was also a part of his dedication because he "was seeking an experience of the passionate union with the divine. He knew this union would come only through the path of love and service" (Dai 15). His service to his faith meant that Father Krick was in the mission of delivering the message of Christianity. He is a devout Christian who acknowledges the superiority of his faith and for which he is committed to face his own peril. His sense of superiority of his work as well as his faith can be measured from this fact that during his journey towards Sommeu, the incessant rain and collapsing of mountains broke the will of his fellow companions that he brought. Krick, however, was still willing to move forward towards his mission, towards Tibet. The narrative states:

They spent the night in the forest drenched and shivering in the biting cold. The men were cursing and ready to turn back. Even Krick felt if he had not been a missionary he would have said: 'Let us go back'. (Dai 95)

The character of Krick is subtly made by Dai as someone who is not lost to the Christian cause, rather he is given a particular voice with a power of self-analysis. Krick has his own doubts and in his introspective moments, he ponders over the effectiveness of his work on the world. He has his moments of doubts and these characteristics bestowed upon him by the author takes the character closer to life and takes him out from the identity of a mere figure in the historical data sheets. His new experiences changed him, especially after her meeting with Gimur, as “he wanted to know her and her house and these people before he could utter the message of God that he had once longed to carry to the ends of the earth. *Know them!* He had started, and knowing had changed him.” (Dai 145). Father Krick’s character in the novel puts into perspective the problem of cultural and religious distinctions. His death is a tragic incident and a hint at the human cost of colonialist expansions. His character stands as a stark opposite to that of Kajinsha’s and Gimur’s who were attached to the land.

The character of Gimur is introduced in the narrative as influential and important. She is not taken from any historical documents and seems an original construct of Dai’s creative imagination. She is a traditional Abor girl but, at the same time, she is also brave and daring. Her character is developed as an intelligent native girl who can see the orthodox limitations of her traditions. Although she knew that her tribe will not accept Kajinsha to be her husband, her love for Kajinsha make her take individual decision of eloping with him. Lendem’s Aunt Moi tried to persuade her to stay as she warned Gimur that a woman should always obey. Gimur, however, has put aside the traditional barriers to listen to her own conscience and this separates her personality from the other women characters in the novel. The self-assuring thoughts of Gimur are conveyed in the following terms:

I will go beyond. When the chance comes for a life beyond, what other choice is there for anyone but to take it? ... A small voice inside her head told her that nothing stayed exactly the same, not even for one season. Life was a tumbling race of moments like a swing, up one way and then suddenly down another before it suddenly ended... This is time standing still, the moment of choice. And after that, felt Gimur, there remained only one thing to do — fly. (Dai 49)

From the very beginning of her introduction, the character of Gimur is presented as a curious girl. She observes the hills around her and “she wondered if there were other villages hidden in the hills and if there were people living across the river” (Dai 2). While she has individuality in the narrative, it would be unwise to judge her as impetuous. She also respects the traditions of her people and remembers important lessons preached by shaman. Her character is made strong by her ability to have independent choice, dignity and resilience against sufferings. When she realised that Kajinsha has cheated on her, she decides to leave him. She could not let the incident go away unnoticed and accept her situation. As a woman, it was expected of her to understand because a man can have many women in his life. But she respects her dignity and strength. She claims that:

‘I have no needs of priests, of him—Kajinsha. No one. What help can they offer me in my life. *My Life?* I have strength too,’ she said, talking to her little boy. ‘We will go back to Mebo. You see, I also believe someone will protect me even though I travel alone. I can walk across these hills. I am not afraid.’ (Dai 152)

Through the character of Gimur, Mamang Dai highlights the role of women in the Abor society. Gimur’s life navigates through personal grievances like loss of her children and husband, yet she shows

courage and steadfast will to live. Her endurance becomes a symbol of resistance against cultural change, traditional conflicts and historical forces of silence and erasure. Her character remains with unflinching dignity even under the pressure.

Gimur's husband Kajinsha is also an important character from the novel. Kajinsha is shown as a serious warrior who is violent and dominating, but at the same time he can be soft and understanding. He is loyal and burdened by the duties of tribal chief. He is an introspective figure who takes his decisions in good judgement. Although he is a tribal chief who is bound to protect his identity, he decides to live with Gimur, an Abor girl, which showcases his romantic side. Like Gimur, he is also willing to act on the personal desires and fulfil the emotional connection. He is also bound by his duties towards his people and this can be easily seen when he asks Krick to leave their territory. Although he had developed a good connection with the white man, he was forced to act against his emotions by his duties towards his people. He arranged a pass for Krick to safely pass from his clan uncle Zumsha's territory. His explanation of his land to Krick shows how deeply he is connected with his territory. Despite his outward strictness, we see that he feels the loss of Krick and guilt of his death. In the end of the novel, he becomes a tragic figure who is cheated by his own people and could not restrict the colonial forces from reshaping their history. Dai subtly uses the narrative as a resistance to colonial erasure by focusing on Kajinsha's tragic life to represent his side of the story.

Check Your Progress

Briefly compare and discuss the characters of Krick, Gimur and Kajinsha. (200 words)

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6.5 Themes and Techniques

The Black Hill by Mamang Dai is a venture into the genre of historical fiction that blends the reality with the undocumented tales from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. The novel recounts the story of 19th century French Christian Priest Nicholas Michel Krick's adventures in the Abor villages and Mishmi Hills of Arunachal Pradesh. The tragedy of Krick's death, along with his companion Augustin Bourry, eluded many historians from unearthing the true circumstances under which this had come to pass. The text refers to the Mishmi chief Kajinsha as the main accused of the case and later he was punished with the death sentence by the authorities. Dai, with her intricate use of various narrative techniques gives life to such a compelling story of the collision of two worlds. Her narrative techniques explore not only the innermost worlds of the indigenous people, their politics, attachments, spiritual worlds but also highlight the perspectives of the colonizers. She closely interweaves the oral traditions, myths and beliefs of the tribe people in her narrative and at the same time exposes the marginalisation and 'subaltern' attitude of the colonizers towards them.

Stop to Consider

The term "subaltern" originally refers to a person of inferior military rank in the English language. Derived from Latin, the word also conveys meanings such as "under" and "other." According to Abrams and Harpham, the term "has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial peoples who employ this

discourse” (277). Broadly, the term refers to marginalized individuals or groups who are excluded from meaningful participation in the dominant power structures. The concept has its roots in the writings of Antonio Gramsci and was later popularized by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit Guha, and Homi K. Bhabha.

The novel fabricates a beautiful story around the important events that have historical significance. Dai achieves this through introducing new characters to the story to give the narrative a humane touch where culture and emotions are blended with history. Such is the introduction of Gimur’s character where she becomes the wife of Kajinsha. Her story provides the readers the unexplored world of tribal life where indigenous lifestyle, tribal conflicts and cultural prospects are explored. Dai’s decision to blend the character of Gimur at the very centre of the story gives the narrative a fulfilment that is otherwise just an official record in the colonial history. The parallel development of Gimur and Kajinsha’s story provides the depth to the narrative forming a new emotional angle in this historical fiction. The uncertain and yet a deep connection among the lovers and the Priest is intentionally developed in the narrative to chart the spectrum of human bonding that negates colonial discourse.

Dai has made references to the oral cultural traditions of her people throughout the narrative. The stories that have come down from generations to generations are referred in the text. Incidences where dreams are interpreted for good or bad omen and other stories that leave a lesson for the society are all part of the oral storytelling. Dai has crafted a narrative where she has fused the oral traditions of her people and this is another significant feature of her narrative style. One of the major references to the importance of orality in their

culture is that Kajinsha requests Gimur, when they meet in the prison, to tell the “others” about his people. The narrative states:

‘Tell them about us,’ Kajinsha had said to her that night in the jail. ‘Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So, we tell stories.’

Stories... words... I too have words... (Dai 288)

These lines depict the veracity that lie in the oral history of their culture. Their histories are preserved in the cultural memory through stories and these spoken records hold as much truth as other cultures where emphasis is provided on the written records. Mamang Dai’s use of stories that travelled generations in their culture is a conscious attempt to prevent the colonial removal of these facts.

In her narrative style, one can notice the use of myths and the environmental elements as narrative devices. Dai’s use of nature as a symbolic entity is not a new introduction in her writing because her poems have showcased the profound significance of nature. In the novel also she uses river, mountains and forests as entities that directly witness the growth of the character or have some part to play in the story. Again, this reflects the animistic worldview of the tribe people who worship nature as sacred presence. Thus, the narrative resists the portrayal of the land as a wild space to be conquered or tamed by representing the deep ecological and cultural relation of the land with people.

There are many important themes that are explicitly intertwined in the text. One of the major themes that is outspoken and appears in the simplest reading of the text is the conflict between foreign and indigenous forces. These forces are cultural as well as quantifiable in the human form. While Father Krick and his companion, Augustin Etienne Bourry, (when Krick visits the Abor villages for the last time) represent the space for change and hybridity, the

subtle and mysterious planning of murdering the white priests by Marpa and Lamet is the revenge of the indigenous people against the invasion of their territory. The false framing of Kajinsha as the main culprit of what happened to the priest is an example of how local politics and competition among the tribes can turn one against the others. Although, Kajinsha was a victim, the story of his fall only showcases how internal conflicts among the tribal people can become dangerous.

Dai explores in the narrative the disorientation of characters as they constantly cross the various boundaries of identity and belonging. This theme of in-betweenness is explored by her through characters like Gimur and Krick. While Gimur violates the social duty by eloping with Kajinsha, a man from different tribe, Father Krick also is mesmerised by the prospects of his life in the hills so that he can give up his old life to welcome the new one in the Abor hills. As Gimur is accepted in Kajinsha's tribe, Father Krick also tries hard to get along with the tribe people. Gimur's condition highlights how the problem of cultural assimilation is a big issue among the different tribes of the land. Hence, belonging is a remarkable theme highlighted in the narrative.

Another important theme in the novel is the historical redressal of events by the author. Dai acknowledges the gaps and lack of colonial justification of events and how the truth can be a multifaceted idea. Colonial accounts of events are often prejudiced and serve the powerful for their own benefits. The story of Kajinsha here is an epitome of how history can be complex and self-serving. Dai creates the background of the tribal chief who might be reduced to just a barbaric man in the records of the colonizers. The author explores the human angle of the story and delves deep into creating the character as also part of a society different than that of colonizers. The communications between Kajinsha and Father Krick

shows how different people from unaccustomed societies can be friendly and accommodating. He tried to convey the message to Krick but he was not available. The narrative states Kajinsha's thoughts after talking with Bourry in the following way:

Again he felt the frustration of not being able to communicate what he wanted to say. Go away. It is not safe for you to stay here. Where is my friend, the other priest? This was what he wanted to say, but he did not want to say anything in front of Lamet. (Dai 233)

Ultimately, Kajinsha's response was not intentional but justified according to the tribal social order. Kajinsha's warning to Bourry to leave his territory reveals not his personal angst but discloses how tribal autonomy works against the individual's personal desires. Hence, the reimagining of the events by the author provides a space to put on the table what might have been the other side of the story.

The narrative opens with a prologue and sets the tone for the story. The author insists on the undocumented past that is going to be addressed in the narrative. She writes:

I have books in front of me. They tell me things about this land, and a priest who walked across these hills carrying a cross and a sextant. They tell me what he saw and thought, but these are words fixed on yellowed paper. There is another story from an unwritten past hidden beyond the mountain wall. (Dai ix)

Dai states that the narrative is unfolding before her as "someone is speaking to me from the past and the words are clear as day: A man, a woman and a priest. This is their story" (Dai x). This voice thus blurs the apparent boundary between present and past. Thus, the story that is in the past unfolds in its recreated non-linearity as the characters have their own stories to tell. The narrative delves into

the past and present of the characters developing their overall history.

One of the major themes that is explored by Dai is the subtle representation of cultural norms and gender dynamics in the tribal lifestyle. When Zumsha, the clan uncle of Kajinsha, visits Kajinsha and Gimur's house with other members of the clan for traditional way to accept the bride (Gimur) in their society, there are rituals that are performed with utmost dexterity. Kajinsha welcomes his clan members by killing a pig and offering rice beer. When Zumsha leaves with the group members, he offers a silver pipe to Gimur and "it was a big gesture. It was a nod of approval..." (Dai 78). This small incident indicates that tribal lifestyle and rituals are full of complex language where each aspect of a simple act can have deeply rooted meaning. Gender roles are also a central issue in Dai's fiction. The representation of Gimur as hardworking and smart woman gives her a distinct identity. She is presented as someone who is not bound by the society but also, at the same time, respects the rituals of the tribes. She loved Kajinsha, a man from different clan, and she was willing to elope with him even though she knew that her clan people will seriously disagree. She has been shown in the narrative as a brave woman who has shown strength and resilience against suffering and pain. Dai has explored the emotional side of tribal women's life in the novel.

It is true that the narrative is a powerful example of how past that is distorted and biased, in the hands of the colonial powers, can be reclaimed and re-written through the tools of storytelling. It also shows how truths about the unclaimed stories are submerged in the depth of various possibilities. It is Dai's sheer power of imagination that has helped in highlighting what can truly be called as the other side of the story. Her narrative meanders in the seriousness of rich tribal life that is deeply embedded in the natural world and the

myths of the land. Her narrative style with layered focus on the silences of history resurrects the stories that were lost in time. The narrative compels the readers to rethink on the political aspects of history and seriously consider how stories as well as memories are conveyed to the public. Through her beautifully crafted novel, Mamang Dai has given voice to the sidelined silences and footnotes of the colonial history.

Check Your Progress

Comment and discuss the important themes and narrative techniques used by Mamang Dai in *The Black Hill*. (200 words)

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6.6 Summing Up

This unit has provided the students with a genuine summary of the text. The students are made aware of the important plot elements of the narrative. The important aspects of the story are thoroughly discussed for the benefit of the students. The unit discussed the important characters of the novel and how they played influential roles in the narrative. The unit also discussed various narrative techniques and themes highlighted in the text. Focusing on Dai's narrative style, the unit discussed important themes like identity, belonging, and the colonial impact on history. The unit has provided the students with ample information to develop their critical perspective on the subject. They are advised to look for other key factors highlighted in the text to better their critical approach.

6.7 References and Suggested Readings

Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Ninth Edition. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.

Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.

Unit-7

Anjum Hasan: “A Short History of Eating”

Unit Structure:

- 7.1 Objectives
- 7.2 Introduction
- 7.3 Summary of the Story
- 7.4 Thematic Analysis
- 7.5 Literary Devices, Style, and Narrative Technique
- 7.6 Summing Up
- 7.7 References and Suggested Readings

7.1 Objectives

Through this unit, you will be able to-

- *introduce* yourself to Anjum Hasan as a meditative writer,
- *read* about the short story in brief,
- *analyse* the themes of the given short story,
- *understand* the literary devices, style, and narrative technique used.

7.2 Introduction

Anjum Hasan, born in 1972 in Shillong, Meghalaya, is a prominent Indian writer known for her contributions to contemporary English literature. Her work spans novels, short stories, poetry, and literary criticism, often reflecting the complexities of Indian society and the nuances of personal identity. Hasan grew up in Shillong, a hill station in northeastern India, which has significantly influenced her literary settings and themes. She pursued a degree in philosophy from North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, which provided her with a foundation in critical thinking that permeates her writing.

Hasan's literary journey began with poetry; her debut collection, *Street on the Hill*, was published by Sahitya Akademi in 2006. The poems vividly depict life in Shillong, capturing the essence of the town and its inhabitants. Her poetry is noted for its introspective quality and attention to the minutiae of everyday life. Transitioning to prose, Hasan's first novel, *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), is set in early 1990s Shillong and intertwines the lives of three characters navigating personal and societal challenges. The novel was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award in 2007. Her second novel, *Neti, Neti* (2009), follows Sophie Das, a young woman from Shillong seeking fulfillment in Bangalore. This work was longlisted for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize and shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010. In 2012, Hasan released *Difficult Pleasures*, a collection of short stories exploring the intricacies of modern life and human relationships. The collection was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and the Crossword Book Award. Her third novel, *The Cosmopolitans* (2015), delves into the world of art and intellectual discourse, earning acclaim as "that rare thing: a novel of ideas."

Hasan's 2018 short story collection, *A Day in the Life*, won the Valley of Words Fiction Award in 2019. Her most recent novel, *History's Angel* (2023), portrays a history teacher's struggle in contemporary Delhi, addressing themes of identity and societal change. The novel received the Mumbai Literature Live! Literary Award for Fiction Book of the Year and the FICCI Book of the Year - Fiction in English in 2024.

Throughout her career, Hasan's work has garnered significant recognition. Her novels and short stories have been shortlisted or longlisted for several prestigious awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, The Hindu Literary Prize, the Crossword Fiction Award, the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, and the Man

Asian Literary Prize. Her accolades reflect her ability to capture the zeitgeist of contemporary India through nuanced storytelling.

Beyond writing, Hasan has contributed to the literary world as an editor and educator. She served as the Books Editor at *The Caravan*, offering critical insights into literary works. Her academic engagements include being a Charles Wallace Writer-in-Residence at the University of Canterbury and a visiting professor of creative writing at Ashoka University. Currently, she is a New India Foundation Fellow, continuing her exploration of Indian narratives. Hasan's literary oeuvre reflects a deep engagement with the evolving landscapes of Indian society. Her works offer readers a window into the complexities of identity, culture, and the human condition, solidifying her place as a significant voice in Indian English literature.

7.3 Summary of the Story

Anjum Hasan's short story "A Short History of Eating" is a vivid, sequential meditation on the narrator's lifelong relationship with food. It begins with a childhood introduction to hunger through "The Barmecide's Feast" from *The Arabian Nights*, in which a poor man pretends to eat a lavish meal and is rewarded with a real one for playing along. This story becomes an early metaphor for the narrator's persistent and symbolic hunger, one that remains even in the presence of food.

As a child, the narrator eats several meals daily but still feels famished. The food around her seems either inaccessible or unappetizing: mysterious Chinese restaurants attract only the enigmatic, while roadside vendors seem questionable of hygiene, and cook with dubious ingredients. Flies roam around syrup-soaked sweets in sweet shop windows, and the rice served in pig's blood is

culturally prohibited. She finds solace in literature, notably *Alice in Wonderland*, where food is often promised but rarely delivered. Alice is offered wine that doesn't exist and uses tea to awaken the Dormouse. Food here, too, becomes a symbol of unattainable satisfaction.

The narrator's early attempts at cooking are improvisational and flawed — vanilla-flavoured peppermint creams, ketchup-laden pizza, and sunken sponge cakes. She yearns for long-lost treats of the 1980s like macaroni rice and poppy-seed thekua. Food, in her childhood imagination, exists more vividly in stories and magazines, in the idealized, rosy world of Enid Blyton.

Literature continues to reflect and intensify her sense of deprivation. David Copperfield's meal at an inn — slowly stolen by a seemingly kind waiter — becomes a parable of false generosity. The waiter eats David's meal under the guise of camaraderie, an echo of the narrator's experience of being fed but being never nourished. She longs to emulate the sisters in *Little Women*, who give away their breakfast to the poor — portraying food not only as sustenance but as moral currency. As she matures, the narrator explores her culinary freedom in college: sipping pale coffee with friends, relishing cutlets, and indulging in greasy noodles until she becomes sick of them. Maggi and Uncle Chipps become symbols of liberation, falsely promising a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Her university days include philosophical reflections inspired by Wittgenstein's austere diet and R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, wherein fasting leads to spiritual clarity. Still, hunger persists.

In married life in Bangalore, food becomes central to companionship. The narrator and her husband share both appetite and ancestral memories of deprivation. They obsessively chase new culinary experiences, compiling restaurant reviews and travelling across the city to try new dishes. Their passion is earnest, not

pretentious: crab masala fry and stuffed thalis outweigh fancy dining decor. The narrator, once a small-town girl, now learns the vocabulary of global cuisine — shawarma, tournedos, John Dory, chow-chow bath — symbolizing India's awakening to culinary diversity. This gastronomic curiosity isn't unique to the couple. The turn of the century sees a cultural shift: eating out becomes both a leisure activity and a marker of social progress. People savour conversation and ambience while waiting for their meals. Yet others consume hurriedly or indifferently, unaware or unbothered by the decadence. Still, a segment, like the narrator, celebrates this newfound indulgence even while millions remain food-insecure.

Over time, this indulgence gives way to ambivalence. She reads *The Trotter-Nama*, where a dying man desires only something sweet — sugar becomes a symbol of overwhelming pleasure, too intense to ignore. Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* reinforces the notion that food is linked to every human excess: violence, lust, indulgence. Eating, in this framework, is inseparable from carnal, even grotesque, desire. As her self-awareness grows, the narrator writes poetry about food and juggles contradictions: the impulse to overeat and the urge to be thin. She references T.S. Eliot, who says poetry must consider the brain and the gut alike. Chips are used to fight workplace boredom, and cookbooks become bedtime literature. Each cultural cookbook brings its own philosophy — the Urdu one values intuition ('hisaab zaroorat'), while the Scandinavian one offers precision.

Her culinary experiments expand. She tries to replicate her mother's recipes, only to realize the originals are irreplaceable. She watches restaurant classics — her favourites like baingan mirchi ka salan, fish and chips — fade away. As Bangalore modernises, many of the couple's favourite eateries vanish or lose their character: the momo

joint, the seafood restaurant, the Viennese schnitzel house — all fade away. These losses suggest a larger cultural erosion.

The story shifts tone as she recounts the story of her grand-aunt who fasts to death after the loss of her brother, choosing hunger as a form of spiritual protest. This episode introduces the Gandhian ethic of ahimsa: it is not what one eats, but the intent behind the act that counts. The act of refusing food becomes a profound gesture of non-violence and grief. Meanwhile, the narrator and her husband stop collecting restaurant clippings. Food becomes entangled with superficiality: atmospheric lighting, curated playlists, image-conscious dining. Urban traffic and the performative nature of eating out begin to eclipse the joy of the meal itself.

In response, the narrator withdraws into literary asceticism. She reads J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, in which the protagonist survives on raw pumpkins and refuses nourishment even when rescued. His body rejects food — not from self-hatred, but because his needs have changed. It is a powerful metaphor for the narrator's evolution: the body, once driven by cravings, now redefines itself through abstention.

The story concludes in quiet moderation. The narrator works more, eats less, crashes often. Mindfulness teaches her to savour a single raisin. Green tea, yoghurt, and rice gruel replace elaborate dishes. Meat is abandoned altogether. She ponders the absurdity of consuming living creatures and dreams about opening a fish that bleeds her menstrual blood — blurring lines between predator and prey. Finally, walking down Church Street past trendy gastropubs, she feels detached from the showiness of contemporary food culture. She and her husband now share minimalist meals — salted porridge, occasional fries, a main dish split between them, desserts skipped. Yet, as they walk home in the drizzle, they realize with surprise and serenity: they are full. They are no longer hungry.

In this poignant, layered narrative, Anjum Hasan offers not just a personal memoir but a cultural history of appetite — its illusions, its excesses, its losses, and its eventual reconciliation. Her memoirish tale tracks a hunger cycle: childhood poverty and illusion; literary and emotional yearning; young-adult hedonism and cultural awakening; overindulgence, moral and physical questioning; mindful abstinence and spiritual reckoning; and gentle, intentional satiation. In the end, fullness is both bodily and existential — a quiet achievement after a tumultuous arc. Food transforms from necessity to symbol, then distraction, indulgence, and finally mindful nourishment. What emerges is a “short history”: a life told through the acts of tasting, forgetting, remembering, resisting, and finally, accepting.

7.4 Thematic Analysis

1. Hunger and Desire

At the heart of Hasan’s story lies the persistent theme of hunger — not merely the physiological kind but also emotional, cultural, and philosophical yearning. From childhood, the narrator experiences hunger as an omnipresent condition, despite eating multiple meals a day. This paradox of eating and still being hungry is emblematic of a deeper lack. Literature becomes an early mirror for this feeling: “The Barmecide’s Feast” introduces hunger as something both performative and ultimately rewarding; *Alice in Wonderland’s* endless, unsatisfying tea parties reflect the surreal and elusive nature of true satiety.

Food symbolizes desire — not only for taste but for connection, escape, identity, and transformation. Even when the narrator grows older and gains access to the culinary riches of restaurants, foreign cuisines, and romantic meals with her husband, hunger lingers. It

becomes clear that what she craves is not simply food but meaning through food. This is depicted when she turns to literature again — Coetzee's *Michael K* and Dickens's *David Copperfield* — where hunger is a metaphor for existential longing. By the end, the narrator acknowledges a moment of satiation, not due to abundance but from emotional and existential reconciliation. The theme of hunger evolves into a meditation on what it means to want and how we are shaped by our desires.

2. Food as Cultural Memory

Hasan's story weaves food into the fabric of personal and collective memory. Food becomes a vehicle to trace identity across time, class, and generational lines. The narrator's recollections of Phantom Sweet Cigarettes, Maggi noodles, or poppy-seed thekua are not only sensory snapshots but cultural relics. These foods represent the innocence, improvisation, and imaginative substitutions of childhood, a time when real food often paled in comparison to the imagined meals in magazines or novels.

As the story progresses, memory becomes intergenerational. The narrator's husband's grandmother eating bark-flour during wartime and her own grandfather contracting tuberculosis due to malnourishment reflect historical food insecurity. The couple's shared genealogy of foodlessness deepens their relationship and gives urgency to their pursuit of indulgence in Bangalore's culinary scene. Yet even the spaces that house these memories — favourite cafes and seafood joints — begin to disappear or decay, signalling the erosion of memory in a rapidly changing urban landscape.

Food is also a literary memory. From *David Copperfield* to *The Guide*, fiction reinforces or recontextualizes the narrator's own experiences with hunger. The story ultimately posits that food is a

carrier of both nostalgia and loss; it allows us to remember but also reminds us of what has vanished or can never be reclaimed.

3. The Gendered Nature of Consumption and Cooking

Anjum Hasan's narrative subtly critiques the gendered dimensions of eating and food preparation. As a child, the narrator mimics recipes for her siblings, signalling the early gendering of kitchen roles. Later, she reads about American women relying on cookbooks in the absence of culinary knowledge passed as heirlooms by their mothers, suggesting how cooking becomes a legacy passed through women — a burden and a skill both inherited and desired.

The narrator's emotional spectrum as an eater is also significant. She eats to cope, to bond, to assert freedom (as with Maggi noodles and chips), and to fit in (as during college coffee sessions). Yet, societal expectations of body image and femininity remain oppressive. She longs to "both stuff myself and become thinner," highlighting the conflicting demands placed on female bodies — to indulge yet abstain, to experience pleasure but not show its effects.

Her story of her grand-aunt's fast is particularly striking: here, refusal of food is a form of power and mourning. The grand-aunt becomes an emblem of female self-sacrifice and spiritual assertion, an echo of Gandhi's fasting, but intensified through a gendered lens. Thus, food is not only sustenance or pleasure, but also a tool of control, resistance, and gendered identity formation.

4. Urbanization and the Changing Landscape of Eating

The evolution of the narrator's eating habits parallels India's socio-economic transformation. In her childhood, food is marked by scarcity, poor hygiene, and suspicion. As India liberalizes and urban centres like Bangalore emerge as cosmopolitan hubs, food becomes a site of indulgence and exploration. The narrator and her husband obsessively chase culinary novelty, sampling everything from Tex-

Mex to Chettinad. Food becomes a proxy for modernity, freedom, and cosmopolitan identity.

However, this urban expansion comes at a cost. Beloved eateries disappear; authenticity gives way to stylized, overpriced dining experiences. The very act of going out to eat becomes an exercise in vanity rather than community or indulgence. The rise of gastropubs and restobars, with names like “Smallys” and “Russsh,” reflects a shift toward image-driven consumption, where the experience must be ‘worthy’ of social media.

Urban alienation creeps in. The narrator no longer finds joy in tracking restaurant openings. Instead, traffic, expense, and homogenization erode the pleasure once found in food adventures. Hasan suggests that while urbanization has widened culinary access, it has also hollowed out its soul. Food, once a site of discovery, becomes commodified, losing its intimate connection with memory, culture, and authenticity.

5. Food and Literature: Intertextual Hunger

A striking thematic device in Hasan’s story is the intertextual role food plays through literary allusions. The narrator’s understanding of hunger and satiety is profoundly shaped by the books she reads. Literature offers frameworks through which she both understands and reinterprets her own experience. From *The Arabian Nights* to *David Copperfield*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Little Women*, *The Guide*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, these texts form a constellation around the narrator’s culinary consciousness.

Each reference serves a thematic function: *Alice*’s surreal food tableaux embody the frustration of unfulfilled desire. Dickens portrays institutional cruelty through stolen meals. Narayan elevates abstinence to spiritual awakening. Coetzee challenges the assumption that survival depends on consumption. Literature

becomes both mirror and mold, shaping the narrator's emotional, intellectual, and even physical responses to food.

This thematic interweaving of text and appetite emphasizes that eating is not a mere act of consumption but of interpretation. Just as the narrator consumes food, she consumes stories — and each informs the other. This literary hunger is never fully sated, suggesting a deeper intellectual yearning. Ultimately, the theme displays Hasan's broader assertion: that food, like literature, is a story we tell ourselves about who we are, where we come from, and what we value.

6. Mindfulness, Mortality, and Minimalism

As the narrative matures, the theme of mindful eating emerges — anchored in the awareness of mortality and a growing distaste for overindulgence. The narrator transitions from a period of voracious consumption to one of restraint and reflection. Green tea replaces biryani; broken rice gruel and yoghurt become symbols of minimalism. This isn't merely dietary adjustment but a philosophical pivot.

Michael K's resistance to food becomes central to this evolution. His starvation is not about death but a rebellion against a world that demands conformity. For the narrator, this confrontation with mortality — through both Michael K and her grand-aunt's fast — reframes food as a moral and existential act. She begins to question the ethics of eating flesh, experiences dreams of bodily connection with food, and reflects on Jeet Thayil's poetry to explore the philosophical implications of consumption.

By the end, meals are simple and infrequent. Dining becomes less about memory-making or indulgence, more about quiet survival and mutual care. The ultimate realization — that she and her husband are “no longer hungry” — is not a conclusion but an awakening. In

restraint, they find a kind of peace that abundance never provided. This thematic closure suggests that freedom is not found in fullness, but in the deliberate act of letting go.

Stop to Consider

There are several pieces of fiction that have focused on hunger, whether literal, spiritual, psychological, or emotional. Here, we will discuss two narratives centred on hunger:

- Franz Kafka's short story, "A Hunger Artist," tells the tale of a professional faster, a man who dedicates his life to the pursuit of prolonged starvation as a form of public art. He performs these feats in a cage, under the watchful eye of an impresario, who limits his fasts to forty days due to dwindling public interest. The hunger artist, however, believes himself capable of much longer fasts, longing for a deeper appreciation of his craft.

Initially, the hunger artist enjoys a period of popularity, with crowds flocking to witness his extreme dedication. He faces skepticism and lack of understanding from the public, who doubt his honesty despite his fervent commitment to his art. As time passes, public interest in hunger artistry fades, and the hunger artist finds himself increasingly forgotten and ignored. He eventually joins a circus, where his cage is relegated to a less prominent location near the animal menagerie. Even here, he is largely overlooked, his fasting days going uncounted and his achievements unappreciated. Eventually, the hunger artist is discovered by an overseer, near death, buried in the straw of his cage. Before dying, he confesses that he should not be admired, revealing that he only fasted because he could not find a food he truly enjoyed. After his death, the circus replaces the hunger artist with a vibrant, joyful panther, which quickly enthralls the crowds, starkly contrasting the forgotten and isolated artist.

“A Hunger Artist” explores themes of alienation, isolation, the relationship between art and society, and the artist's struggle for recognition and understanding. It can be read as an allegory for the misunderstood artist or a critique of societal indifference towards true artistic dedication.

AI responses may include mistakes.

- Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* (original title: *Sult*) is a semi-autobiographical chronicle of a struggling young writer in late 19th-century Kristiania (now Oslo), Norway. The unnamed narrator battles both physical and psychological hunger as he tries to make a living as a writer. The narrative delves into his declining mental and physical state, as he struggles with poverty and alienation in a modernizing city.

The story unfolds through a series of episodic encounters as the protagonist wanders the city streets, unable to afford food or lodging. He encounters various individuals, including a young woman named Ylajali with whom he has a brief, somewhat ambiguous relationship. The narrator's pride and self-destructive tendencies prevent him from accepting help or pursuing more stable employment, even when offered. He experiences hallucinations and delusions as his hunger intensifies, blurring the lines between reality and his distorted perceptions. The novel emphasizes the devastating psychological impact of prolonged starvation, and Hamsun uses it as a metaphor for the artist's struggle for recognition and meaning in an indifferent society. *Hunger* is considered a landmark work in modernist literature due to its groundbreaking use of stream-of-consciousness narration and its exploration of the human psyche. It influenced many later writers and is still recognized as a powerful and disturbing portrait of human suffering and resilience.

Check Your Progress

1. What role do literary allusions (e.g., “The Barmecide’s Feast,” *Alice in Wonderland*, *David Copperfield*) play in illuminating the narrator’s inner life? (200 words)
2. How does Hasan’s tone — with its lyrical, reflective, sometimes wry voice — enhance the story’s emotional resonance? (150 words)
3. How does the chronological structure — moving from childhood fantasies to mindful adulthood — mirror the narrator’s evolving relationship with food and desire? (200 words)

7.5 Literary Devices, Style, and Narrative Technique

Literary Devices

- **Imagery:** One of the most prominent literary devices in Anjum Hasan’s “A Short History of Eating” is imagery. Through detailed and visceral descriptions, Hasan evokes the sensory landscape of food — its taste, texture, smell, and visual appeal — often juxtaposing allure with revulsion. Early in the story, childhood hunger is not merely stated but vividly shown through scenes such as flies dipping their limbs into syrup-filled basins in greasy sweet shops and pakori vendors using oil black as sin. These images provoke disgust while simultaneously building the atmosphere of scarcity and longing. Food is both ubiquitous and inaccessible, and this contradiction is sharpened through rich visual and olfactory cues.

Imagery is also employed to capture fantasy and desire. The narrator conjures the rose-tinted world of Enid Blyton’s stories or the

imagined flavour of ‘bondas’ while reading *The Guide*. Literary meals, imaginary or absent, are imbued with sensory richness, becoming more vivid than real food. In adulthood, the descriptions become more lush and indulgent: “medieval-looking pots of biryani,” “crab masala fry,” “whole pomfrets.” These lush portrayals elevate food from sustenance to object of devotion. Hasan’s imagery thus functions dually — it reveals both the hunger of the stomach and the hunger of the imagination, showing how food anchors memory, desire, and identity. This device powerfully communicates emotional truth through physical sensation.

- **Intertextuality:** Hasan’s narrative is rich in intertextual references — an intricate weaving of classic literature into the narrator’s personal story. These references are not ornamental; they deepen thematic exploration and establish a literary dialogue between hunger, deprivation, and imagination. From *The Arabian Nights* to *David Copperfield*, *Little Women*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Guide*, literature becomes a lens through which food and hunger are experienced.

The Barmecide’s Feast is the first such intertext, where imagined food is rewarded with real sustenance — highlighting how hunger and pretense are connected. Alice’s tea party, absurd and unsatisfying, reflects the frustration of craving in a surreal world where meaning and nourishment are elusive. David Copperfield’s stolen meal dramatizes betrayal disguised as hospitality. The March sisters in *Little Women* show the virtue of sacrifice, contrasting earlier stories of deprivation with a moral dimension of generosity. These allusions aren’t mere citations; they act as emotional and philosophical companions, helping the narrator process her own evolving relationship with food.

Intertextuality here serves as a mirror of cultural upbringing. The narrator's engagement with English literature reveals a colonial inheritance where foreign stories frame her understanding of pleasure, need, and virtue. In turn, these texts shape not only her longing but also her ideas of justice, community, and identity through the metaphor of food.

- **Symbolism:** Food in Hasan's story is far more than sustenance — it becomes a multi-layered symbol that tracks shifting emotional and cultural landscapes. In childhood, food symbolizes fantasy and exclusion. The real food around is dirty, suspect, or forbidden; the imagined food of literature and advertising becomes an emblem of desire and aspiration. Phantom cigarettes, lollies, and ketchup pizzas mark both nostalgia and improvisation — they act as stand-ins for an inaccessible culinary ideal.

As the narrator grows, food symbolizes freedom and belonging. College snacks and Western brands like Uncle Chipps and Maggi become symbols of cultural awakening and cosmopolitan liberty, mistakenly equated with modernity and empowerment. With marriage, food becomes a shared language of love — rituals of eating together symbolizing emotional intimacy and mutual history. Later, food embodies loss and decay: vanished eateries, deteriorated restaurants, and forgotten dishes symbolize the erosion of time and culture. The grand-aunt's fasting turns food — or the refusal of it — into a symbol of mourning and protest, a parallel to Gandhi's use of hunger as moral resistance. Finally, the shift to mindful eating, porridge, and gruel signifies spiritual recalibration. Thus, food evolves as a symbol of class, love, grief, resistance, nostalgia, and transcendence — making it the central metaphor of the narrator's emotional and existential journey.

- **Tone and Voice:** Hasan's tone in the essay is meditative, nostalgic, and self-aware, shaped by the confessional voice of the narrator. The tone shifts subtly with the narrator's age and emotional states — from playful recollection and ironic commentary in childhood memories to passionate celebration in youth and quiet detachment in later adulthood. These tonal modulations mirror the evolution of her relationship with food.

In early sections, the tone is lightly ironic, tinged with humour and wistfulness. The narrator recounts childhood hunger and failed birthday recipes with a resigned amusement. This changes to an exuberant, romantic tone in her account of early marriage and gastronomic exploration, where food is described with delight and indulgence. However, this enthusiasm gradually gives way to disillusionment. The tone becomes elegiac as the narrator reflects on the loss of beloved restaurants and the gentrification of eating spaces. The urban noise, rising prices, and changing aesthetics are narrated with a kind of quiet lament.

By the end, the voice is contemplative and stripped down, reflecting a spiritual maturation. Eating becomes less about thrill and more about balance. This tonal journey—from hunger to excess to simplicity—mirrors a broader philosophical arc, suggesting that the narrator has outgrown food as fantasy and embraced it as reality, suffused with restraint and mindfulness.

- **Juxtaposition:** Hasan employs juxtaposition as a narrative technique to highlight contrast and provoke reflection. Childhood food — scarce, unhygienic, or forbidden — is set against the rich fantasy meals of literature, revealing a stark gap between lived experience and imagined delight. The recurring pairing of disgusting real food (flies on syrup, pig's

blood rice) with fictional or remembered feasts underscores this emotional and material deprivation.

This technique also marks generational and social contrasts. The narrator's indulgent adult meals are set against ancestral hunger: her grandfather's tuberculosis from malnourishment and her husband's grandmother grinding bark into flour. Similarly, the abundance enjoyed in adulthood is contrasted with the narrator's later move toward asceticism and simple meals like salted porridge. This reversal highlights how indulgence, once sought with hunger and hope, can become hollow and excessive.

Juxtaposition is used philosophically, too. Greenaway's film conjoins eating with violence and lust; Coetzee's novel contrasts survival with self-effacement. These placements force the reader to see eating not just as nourishment, but as a deeply moral, even existential act. Each contrast sharpens the complexity of hunger — not only as absence, but also as excess, memory, love, resistance, and finally, acceptance.

- **Personification and Anthropomorphism:** Though used sparingly, personification enhances the text's emotional resonance. Flies are described as “dipping their trembling limbs” in syrup basins, adding both disgust and vulnerability to an otherwise repulsive image. The flies become agents, not just nuisances, contributing to the aura of decay that pervades the narrator's early environment.

Food and hunger are also subtly anthropomorphized. Meals are remembered with “tenderness,” suggesting that food has its own emotional valence. In her recollections with her husband, dishes seem to possess life, remembered like friends or lovers. Food becomes both subject and companion, infused with human characteristics — capable of offering comfort, triggering nostalgia,

or betraying expectations. Even the narrator's stomach seems to possess agency, as it "cherishes" food or learns to "no longer want." These anthropomorphic touches create intimacy between the reader and the subject matter, transforming abstract experiences like hunger, nostalgia, and satisfaction into embodied, almost animate forces. This heightens the lyrical quality of the narrative, turning eating into a dialogic act between the body and the world — a conversation, sometimes comforting, sometimes desperate, but always deeply human.

Style

Anjum Hasan's "A Short History of Eating" is distinguished by its elegant, introspective, and essayistic narrative style, marked by personal memory, literary allusion, and socio-cultural commentary. The story unfolds in a loosely chronological structure, but what defines its rhythm is not time alone — it is hunger, in all its literal and metaphorical forms. Hasan's prose moves fluidly across decades and geographies, revealing how appetite evolves from bodily necessity to emotional metaphor.

Her voice is confessional yet controlled, interweaving intimate recollections with references to classic literature — *Alice in Wonderland*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Women*, and *The Guide* — to draw parallels between imagined food and lived experience. This intertextuality not only enriches the emotional depth of the narrative but also reflects how literature and life inform each other. The language is lyrical and evocative, peppered with sensory detail and cultural specificity — Phantom Sweet Cigarettes, chow-chow bath, kokum curry — grounding the abstract idea of hunger in tangible, textured reality.

Hasan also employs irony and contrast effectively. The excitement of Western-branded snacks is set against the bleakness of real

deprivation. The couple's gourmand indulgence is tinged with inherited trauma and a keen awareness of social disparity. Her style matures along with her subject — what begins in wonder and craving gradually turns meditative and restrained, echoing the physical and philosophical shift from consumption to contemplation. The tone remains personal yet resonant, inviting readers to recognize themselves in both excess and abstinence. Hasan's style captures the complexity of modern appetite — not merely the food on the plate, but the emotions, identities, and histories that shape how we eat, remember, and resist.

Narrative Technique

Anjum Hasan employs a rich, introspective first-person narrative in “A Short History of Eating,” blending memoir, cultural commentary, and literary reflection. The essay functions as a personal chronicle, yet its appeal is universal, exploring how food intersects with memory, identity, class, and desire. The confessional tone invites intimacy, offering the reader access to the narrator's evolving emotional and intellectual relationship with food.

The narrative is structured as a reflective journey, moving chronologically from childhood to adulthood, tracing how the narrator's perceptions of food shift over time. Hasan's use of vivid imagery and sensory detail brings each memory to life — be it the grotesque syrup-drenched rosogullas in shop windows or the romanticized recollection of risotto in Verona. Her voice is lyrical yet grounded, marked by philosophical depth and literary allusions, ranging from *The Arabian Nights* and *David Copperfield* to J.M. Coetzee and T.S. Eliot. These references do not distract but enrich the narrative, positioning food as a metaphor for broader existential concerns — hunger as both physical craving and emotional void.

Hasan masterfully interweaves personal anecdote with social observation. The narrative shifts from innocent childhood longing to adult indulgence and finally to a tempered, minimalist approach to eating, mirroring emotional maturity. Despite the story's movement across time and geography, the voice remains consistent — contemplative, wry, and poignantly self-aware.

The fragmented yet coherent structure mirrors memory itself: recursive, sensory, and shaped by experience rather than event. Hasan does not offer a conventional plot but instead builds meaning through accumulation. By chronicling not just meals but moods, losses, and cultural shifts, the narrative technique invites the reader to consider eating as a profoundly narrative act — one that tells stories of self, family, nation, and desire. Ultimately, the story's power lies in its ability to make hunger — literal and metaphorical — felt in every sentence.

SAQ

1. The narrative evolves from exuberance to restraint. In what ways do the closing scenes (salted porridge, shared meals, “we are full”) reflect a philosophical shift toward mindfulness? (150 words)
2. Consider the metaphor of hunger: literal deprivation, aesthetic indulgence, emotional emptiness, moral fasting. How does the story explore the interconnectedness of these forms of hunger? (200-250 words)
3. In what ways does the story critique consumerism and liberalization? (100-150 words)

7.6 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Anjum Hasan and her short story “A Short History of Eating” from the collection *A Day in the Life*. For further reading, refer to the section below.

7.7 References and Suggested Readings

- Baishya, Amit. *Contemporary Literature from Northeast India: Deathworlds, Terror and Survival*. Routledge, 2024.
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Unit-8

Sishir Basumatari: *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*

Unit Structure:

- 8.1 Objectives
- 8.2 Introduction
- 8.3 Historical and Biographical Context
- 8.4 Form and Genre: Graphic Biography
 - 8.4.1 Discussion of *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*
- 8.5 Visual Style and Narrative Technique
- 8.6 Themes and Motifs
- 8.7 Reception and Relevance
- 8.8 Summing Up
- 8.9 References and Suggested Reading

8.1 Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to-

- *understand* the form and genre of the graphic novel,
- *analyse* the narrative style and narrative technique used in *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*,
- *discuss* the historical and biographical context of Basumatari's novel,
- *study* the themes and motifs used in the novel.

8.2 Introduction

Sishir Basumatari is a multifaceted artist from Assam, India, whose work spans photography, filmmaking, and graphic storytelling. He is particularly noted for his innovative approach to biographical narratives, most prominently exemplified in his graphic novel *The*

Real Mr Barkotoki (2019), which delves into the enigmatic life of Assamese writer and critic Munin Barkotoki.

Based in Dudhnoi, Assam, Basumatari's artistic journey encompasses various mediums. He has engaged in body painting and photography, with his work showcased at the Delhi Photo Festival in 2011. His foray into filmmaking includes serving as the art director for the short film *Seven Hundred Zero Zero Seven*, which featured Assamese writer Ranju Hazarika and garnered the Golden Conch for Best Documentary at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2014.

The Real Mr Barkotoki stands as Basumatari's most acclaimed work, blending elements of noir, mystery, and biography. The novel originated from a project to decipher 17 diaries penned by Munin Barkotoki between 1980 and 1993, known for their challenging handwriting. This endeavour led Basumatari to craft a narrative that intertwines fact and fiction, following a protagonist haunted by dreams of Barkotoki and embarking on a quest to uncover the writer's identity. The narrative employs a surreal and non-linear structure, incorporating dream sequences, hypnosis sessions, and fantastical elements such as ghostly magistrates and time-traveling cars. This approach reflects the fragmented and elusive nature of Barkotoki's life and writings. Basumatari's illustrations, rendered in a monochromatic, cross-hatched style, evoke a noir aesthetic reminiscent of Joe Sacco's work, effectively conveying the novel's haunting and introspective tone.

Upon its release at the Northeast Book Fair in Guwahati, *The Real Mr Barkotoki* received praise for its artistic merit and innovative storytelling. Renowned author Arup Kumar Dutta lauded the novel as a work of art, highlighting its draftsmanship and the surreal atmosphere created through its visuals. Critics have noted the novel's ability to transcend traditional biographical formats, offering

a layered and immersive experience that captures the complexities of its subject. The Hindu BusinessLine described it as a “raw, original and visceral” work that successfully merges diverse narrative elements into a cohesive and compelling story.

Basumatari’s work has contributed significantly to the evolution of graphic novels in India, demonstrating the medium’s capacity for serious literary exploration. By weaving together personal narrative, historical context, and imaginative storytelling, Basumatari has created a unique and impactful portrayal of one of Assam’s literary figures, inspiring renewed interest and appreciation for regional literature and history.

8.3 Historical and Biographical Context

- ***Historical Context***

The Real Mr. Barkotoki is set against the backdrop of Assam during the 1980s, a period marked by significant socio-political upheaval. This era witnessed the Assam Movement (1979–1985), a mass agitation led by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), demanding the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants. The movement culminated in the Assam Accord of 1985, which sought to address issues of illegal immigration and preserve Assamese cultural identity.

The 1980s in Assam were also characterized by a burgeoning literary scene that grappled with themes of identity, displacement, and resistance. Writers and intellectuals engaged deeply with the region’s complex history and cultural tapestry. Munin Barkotoki, the central figure in Basumatari’s novel, was a prominent literary critic and writer during this time. His work often reflected the tensions and aspirations of Assamese society, making him a significant voice in the region’s literary discourse. Basumatari’s

graphic novel captures this historical milieu by weaving in elements of political unrest, cultural introspection, and the quest for identity. The narrative's noir and surrealistic tones mirror the uncertainty and complexity of the period, offering readers a lens through which to understand the challenges and transformations of 1980s Assam.

- ***Biographical Context***

Munin Barkotoki (1915–1993) was a distinguished Assamese writer, critic, and editor known for his profound contributions to Assamese literature. Born in Assam, he played a pivotal role in shaping the literary landscape of the region. During the British colonial period, Assam experienced a surge in literary and cultural movements aimed at preserving and promoting indigenous languages and traditions. Barkotoki's work was instrumental in this cultural renaissance, as he engaged in literary criticism and supported emerging writers, thereby shaping the trajectory of Assamese literature. His work encompassed literary criticism, essays, and editorial endeavors, and he was instrumental in promoting Assamese literature and nurturing emerging writers.

One of the unique aspects of Barkotoki's legacy is his extensive collection of personal diaries, spanning from 1980 to 1993. These diaries, written in his notoriously difficult handwriting, offer intimate insights into his thoughts, experiences, and the socio-cultural environment of his time. After his passing, his daughter, Meenaxi Barkotoki, sought to decipher these diaries, and approached Shisir Basumatari for the same.

Shisir Basumatari's engagement with these diaries became the foundation for *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*. Initially conceived as a film project, Basumatari transitioned to the graphic novel format, drawing inspiration from works like Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. The novel blends biographical elements with fictionalized narratives,

creating a tapestry that reflects both the enigmatic nature of Barkotoki and the broader themes of memory, identity, and cultural legacy. Basumatari's artistic approach captures the essence of Barkotoki's life, presenting it through a lens that is both personal and universally resonant.

8.4 Form and Genre: Graphic Biography

The graphic biography is a distinctive literary and artistic form that merges the factual rigour of biographical writing with the visual storytelling techniques of comics. This hybrid genre offers a multifaceted approach to narrating real-life stories, providing readers with both textual and visual insights into the subject's life.

Graphic biographies are book-length works that depict the life of a real person through sequential art. Unlike graphic memoirs, which are autobiographical, graphic biographies are authored by individuals other than the subject, offering an external perspective on the subject's life. This distinction is crucial, as it influences the narrative voice and the portrayal of events within the work. The narrative structure of graphic biographies often combines chronological storytelling with thematic exploration. The use of panels, gutters, and visual motifs allows for the depiction of complex timelines and the juxtaposition of past and present events. Visual elements such as facial expressions, body language, and setting play a significant role in conveying the emotional and psychological states of characters, often transcending the limitations of text alone.

Graphic biographies employ a diverse range of artistic styles, from realistic illustrations to abstract or symbolic representations. This diversity allows artists to tailor the visual aesthetic to the subject matter, enhancing the reader's engagement and understanding. For

instance, the use of Pardhan Gond art in *Bhimayana* not only illustrates the life of B.R. Ambedkar but also embeds the narrative within a specific cultural and artistic tradition, enriching the reader's experience.

The graphic biography format has been recognized for its educational potential, particularly in engaging readers with complex historical and biographical content. The combination of visual and textual storytelling can aid in comprehension and retention, making it a valuable tool in educational settings. Moreover, the format's accessibility can introduce readers to subjects they might not encounter through traditional texts.

While graphic biographies offer unique advantages, they also present challenges. The condensation of a person's life into a limited number of pages requires careful selection of events and themes, which can lead to the omission of significant details. Additionally, the interpretation of real-life events through an artist's lens introduces subjectivity, necessitating a critical approach to the consumption of such works.

Stop to Consider

Graphic novels have emerged as a powerful medium for storytelling, blending visual art with narrative depth to explore complex themes. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* are seminal works that have garnered critical acclaim for their poignant depictions of historical and personal struggles. Shisir Basumatari's *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*, while less internationally known, offers a unique perspective rooted in Assamese culture.

***Maus*: A Tale of Survival and Memory**

Spiegelman's *Maus* is a groundbreaking graphic novel that portrays the harrowing experiences of his father, Vladek, during the

Holocaust. Employing anthropomorphic characters—Jews as mice, Germans as cats—Spiegelman presents a stark visual metaphor for the racial dynamics of the era. The narrative oscillates between past and present, juxtaposing Vladek’s survival story with Spiegelman’s own struggles to understand his father’s trauma. Themes of memory, guilt, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma are central to the work. The minimalist black-and-white artwork reinforces the bleakness of the subject matter, while the non-linear narrative structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory.

Persepolis: A Personal and Political Memoir

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* offers an autobiographical account of her childhood and adolescence in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. The graphic novel delves into themes of identity, repression, and resistance, as Satrapi navigates the complexities of growing up in a society undergoing radical political and cultural changes. The stark black-and-white illustrations, characterized by their simplicity, effectively convey the emotional gravity of the narrative. Satrapi’s use of a child’s perspective provides an intimate lens through which readers can engage with the broader socio-political context.

Comparative Analysis

While *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* all utilize the graphic novel format to explore themes of memory and identity, their approaches and contexts differ significantly. *Maus* and *Persepolis* are rooted in significant historical events — the Holocaust and the Iranian Revolution, respectively — providing personal perspectives on global tragedies. In contrast, *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* focuses on a regional literary figure, offering insights into Assamese culture and history. *Maus* employs a dual narrative, intertwining past and present to highlight the enduring impact of

trauma. *Persepolis* follows a linear progression, chronicling Satrapi's growth and experiences. *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* adopts a more fragmented, dream-like structure, reflecting the elusive nature of its subject. The minimalist black-and-white illustrations in *Maus* and *Persepolis* depict the gravity of their narratives. Basumatari's work, however, is characterized by detailed cross-hatching and a surreal aesthetic, enhancing the mysterious tone of the story.

All three works grapple with the complexities of memory and identity. *Maus* delves into the intergenerational transmission of trauma, *Persepolis* explores personal identity amidst political upheaval, and *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* examines the reconstruction of a cultural figure's legacy.

8.4.1 Discussion of *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*

Shisir Basumatari's *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* is a genre-defying graphic novel that intricately weaves together elements of noir mystery, biography, and surreal fiction. At its core, the narrative follows an unnamed protagonist plagued by recurring dreams of Munin Barkotoki, a prominent yet enigmatic figure in Assamese literature. This dream-induced quest propels the protagonist, along with companions Captain D and Dr. Das, into an investigation that blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination.

Basumatari's work is deeply rooted in the life and legacy of Munin Barkotoki, who was born in Jorhat in 1915 and became a significant literary critic and journalist in Assam. Barkotoki's contributions to Assamese literature were substantial, yet his personal life remained shrouded in mystery, partly due to his notoriously illegible handwriting, which rendered his diaries nearly indecipherable. This aspect becomes a pivotal plot device in the novel, symbolizing the challenges of reconstructing a fragmented past.

The narrative structure of the novel is non-linear and labyrinthine, reflecting the complexities of memory and the act of storytelling. Basumatari employs a visual style characterized by grey, grainy sketches that evoke the ephemeral nature of dreams and memories. This aesthetic choice reinforces the novel's themes of uncertainty and the elusive nature of truth. Throughout the novel, Basumatari integrates real historical figures and events with fictional elements, creating a tapestry that challenges the reader's perception of reality. The inclusion of personalities like Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, Sigmund Freud, and Kurt Vonnegut, alongside Assamese literary figures such as Satyaprasad Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika, adds layers of intertextuality and cultural commentary. The protagonist's journey is marked by encounters with ghostly magistrates, time-travelling vehicles, and a quest involving missing plutonium on the Nanda Devi peak. These surreal episodes serve as metaphors for the complexities of the human psyche and the multifaceted nature of identity. The therapy sessions with Dr. Das, involving hypnosis and experimental drugs, further delve into the subconscious, highlighting the interplay between memory, trauma, and self-discovery.

Basumatari's decision to present this narrative as a graphic novel is significant. The medium allows for a unique interplay between text and image, enabling the exploration of themes like memory and identity in a manner that traditional prose might not achieve. The visual transitions between different timelines and realities are executed with cinematic techniques, such as varying perspectives and framing, which enhance the storytelling and immerse the reader in the protagonist's fragmented world. The novel's structure, with its multiple dead ends and non-linear progression, mirrors the protagonist's own frustrations in uncovering Barkotoki's life. This narrative choice emphasizes the idea that understanding the past is

often a convoluted process, filled with ambiguities and contradictions. Basumatari cleverly attributes the novel's unreliability to its narrator, inviting readers to question the nature of truth and the reliability of memory.

The Real Mr. Barkotoki stands as a testament to Basumatari's innovative storytelling and artistic prowess. By blending fact with fiction, and employing a distinctive visual style, he crafts a narrative that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant. The novel not only pays homage to Munin Barkotoki's literary contributions but also invites readers to reflect on the broader themes of memory, identity, and the complexities inherent in reconstructing the past.

8.5 Visual Style and Narrative Technique

- **Visual Style of *The Real Mr. Barkotoki***

The artwork is rendered in black-and-white illustrations, utilizing stark contrasts and meticulous line work to evoke a sense of historical authenticity. This monochromatic palette not only reflects the period in which Barkotoki lived but also underscores the seriousness of his contributions to Assamese literature. The illustrations are characterized by detailed depictions of settings and characters, capturing the essence of mid-20th-century Assam. Basumatari's attention to architectural elements, traditional attire, and cultural artifacts provides readers with a visual immersion into the era. The use of shading and cross-hatching techniques adds depth and texture to the scenes, enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal. Panel layouts in the novel are thoughtfully designed to guide the reader's eye smoothly through the narrative. The variation in panel sizes and perspectives contributes to the dynamic pacing of the story, allowing for moments of introspection as well as action.

Basumatari occasionally employs full-page spreads to emphasize significant events or emotional climaxes, thereby drawing the reader's focus to pivotal moments in Barkotoki's life.

Furthermore, the integration of Assamese script within the illustrations serves to root the narrative firmly in its cultural context. This inclusion not only pays homage to Barkotoki's linguistic heritage but also enriches the authenticity of the storytelling. The interplay between text and image is seamless, with visual elements complementing the written word to create a cohesive narrative experience. The visual style of *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* is a deliberate and effective choice that enhances the storytelling by providing historical context, cultural depth, and emotional resonance. Basumatari's artistic decisions contribute significantly to the reader's understanding and appreciation of Barkotoki's life and work.

- **Narrative Technique of *The Real Mr. Barkotoki***

Basumatari utilizes a first-person narrative voice, allowing readers to experience events from Barkotoki's perspective. This approach fosters a sense of intimacy and personal connection, as readers gain insight into Barkotoki's thoughts, motivations, and emotional responses. The use of internal monologues and reflective passages further deepens this connection, providing a nuanced portrayal of the protagonist. The narrative structure is punctuated by flashbacks and anecdotal recollections, which serve to contextualize Barkotoki's experiences within the broader socio-political landscape of Assam. These temporal shifts are seamlessly integrated, with visual cues and transitions guiding the reader through different time periods. This technique not only enriches the narrative but also highlights the enduring impact of historical events on individual lives.

Dialogue plays a crucial role in advancing the plot and developing character relationships. Basumatari's use of authentic language and colloquialisms lends credibility to the interactions, capturing the linguistic nuances of Assamese society. The dialogues are concise yet impactful, revealing character traits and dynamics without superfluous exposition. Additionally, the narrative incorporates excerpts from Barkotoki's writings and contemporaneous literary works, providing readers with direct access to the intellectual milieu of the time. These intertextual elements not only underscore Barkotoki's literary contributions but also situate his work within the larger context of Assamese literature.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Basumatari's use of the graphic novel format influence the portrayal of Munin Barkotoki's enigmatic life? (100-200 words)
2. What role does the setting of 1980s Guwahati play in shaping the atmosphere of the novel? (100-200 words)
3. How does the narrative structure, blending fiction and biographical elements, challenge traditional notions of authorship and authenticity in storytelling? (200 words)

8.6 Themes and Motifs

Themes

- ***Obsession with the Unknowable***

In *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*, the protagonist's relentless quest to understand the enigmatic figure of Munin Barkotoki epitomizes an obsession with the unknowable. Haunted by recurring dreams of Barkotoki, the protagonist embarks on a journey that blurs the lines between reality and imagination. This pursuit is not merely about

uncovering biographical facts but about the human desire to comprehend that which eludes understanding. The narrative structure, interweaving dreams, hypnosis sessions, and surreal experiences, explores the complexities of memory and the challenges inherent in reconstructing a life from fragmented pieces. Basumatari's portrayal of this obsession reflects a broader commentary on the human condition — our innate drive to seek meaning in the enigmatic and to find coherence in the disjointed narratives of others' lives.

- ***Memory and the Act of Retelling***

Memory serves as both a theme and a narrative device in the graphic novel. The protagonist's journey is propelled by fragments of recollections, both his own and those extracted from Barkotoki's diaries. The act of retelling — through hypnosis, diary entries, and imagined interviews — highlights the fluidity of memory and the subjectivity involved in reconstructing the past. Basumatari emphasizes that memory is not a static repository of facts but a dynamic, often unreliable, process influenced by personal biases and interpretations. This theme invites readers to question the authenticity of narratives and to consider the ways in which stories are shaped, reshaped, and sometimes distorted over time.

- ***The Intersection of Reality and Surrealism***

Basumatari masterfully blends elements of reality with surrealistic motifs to create a narrative that challenges conventional perceptions of time and space. The protagonist's experiences — ranging from deciphering indecipherable diaries to encountering ghostly magistrates and time-traveling vehicles — blur the boundaries between the tangible and the fantastical. This interplay serves to mirror the complexities of exploring a historical figure whose life is shrouded in mystery. The surreal elements act as metaphors for the

elusive nature of truth and the often convoluted path to understanding. By intertwining the real with the surreal, Basumatari prompts readers to reflect on the multifaceted nature of reality and the myriad ways in which it can be perceived and interpreted.

- ***Cultural Preservation and Literary Legacy***

The graphic novel underscores the importance of cultural preservation through the lens of Munin Barkotoki's life and works. As the protagonist delves into Barkotoki's contributions to Assamese literature, the narrative brings to light the challenges of maintaining and honoring literary legacies in the face of time and neglect. The physical deterioration of Barkotoki's diaries, coupled with the difficulty in deciphering his handwriting, symbolizes the fragility of cultural artifacts and the urgency of preserving them. Basumatari's work serves as both a tribute to and a revival of Barkotoki's legacy, emphasizing the role of storytelling in keeping cultural histories alive for future generations.

Motifs

- ***Illegible Handwriting***

The motif of Barkotoki's notoriously illegible handwriting recurs throughout the narrative, symbolizing the challenges of accessing and interpreting the past. The protagonist's struggle to make sense of the diaries reflects the broader difficulties inherent in historical reconstruction. This motif also serves as a metaphor for the obscured and often inaccessible nature of personal histories, emphasizing the gaps and ambiguities that researchers and biographers frequently encounter.

- ***Dreams and Hypnosis***

Dream sequences and hypnosis sessions are pivotal in advancing the plot and exploring the subconscious mind. These elements allow the

protagonist to access memories and insights that are otherwise unattainable, blurring the line between reality and imagination. The use of dreams and hypnosis underscores the theme of memory's subjectivity and the idea that understanding the past often requires delving into the depths of the unconscious.

- ***Time Travel and Surreal Encounters***

The narrative incorporates elements of time travel and surreal encounters, such as ghostly magistrates and flying cars, to emphasize the non-linear and often fantastical journey of uncovering history. These motifs highlight the complexities of piecing together a coherent narrative from fragmented and sometimes contradictory sources. They also reflect the protagonist's internal struggle and the disorienting nature of his quest.

- ***Masks and Identity***

The motif of masks appears in the protagonist's attempt to recreate the face from his dreams, symbolizing the multifaceted nature of identity and the challenges of truly understanding another person. Masks represent both concealment and revelation, suggesting that uncovering someone's true self often involves navigating layers of persona and perception. This motif aligns with the novel's exploration of the complexities of personal and historical identity.

8.7 Reception and Relevance

- **Reception of the Novel**

Upon its release in 2019, *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* garnered significant attention within Indian literary circles, particularly among proponents of graphic storytelling and scholars of Northeast Indian literature. Critics lauded the novel for its innovative narrative structure and compelling visual artistry. Aditya Mani Jha, writing for

Open magazine, highlighted the book's exploration of consciousness, memory, and the act of retelling, drawing parallels to the works of Roberto Bolaño and Kurt Vonnegut. The graphic novel's visual style received particular acclaim. Basumatari's meticulous cross-hatching and detailed illustrations were noted for their resemblance to Joe Sacco's work, especially in *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza*. This artistic approach effectively conveyed the noir atmosphere of the narrative, immersing readers in the enigmatic world of Munin Barkotoki.

Beyond critical reviews, *The Real Mr. Barkotoki* found its place in academic discourse. It has been incorporated into university syllabi, such as the Royal Global University's BA English program, under the module "Visual Storytelling from Northeast India." This inclusion signifies the novel's relevance in discussions about regional literature and its innovative narrative techniques.

- **Relevance of the Novel**

The Real Mr. Barkotoki holds a distinctive place in Indian literature, particularly in the context of Northeast Indian narratives. The novel's genesis from Barkotoki's indecipherable diaries symbolizes the complexities of preserving cultural and personal histories. Basumatari's decision to transform these fragmented narratives into a graphic novel underscores the potential of visual storytelling in capturing the essence of elusive subjects. This medium allows for a layered exploration of themes, combining textual and visual elements to convey the intricacies of Barkotoki's character and the socio-cultural milieu of 1980s Guwahati.

Furthermore, the novel contributes to the diversification of Indian literary forms. By adopting the graphic novel format, Basumatari challenges traditional literary conventions, expanding the possibilities for storytelling in Indian literature. This innovation is

particularly significant in representing Northeast Indian experiences, which have often been marginalized in mainstream narratives. Academically, the novel's inclusion in university curricula highlights its educational value. It serves as a resource for studying regional literature, narrative techniques, and the interplay between text and image. Students and scholars can engage with the novel to explore themes of cultural identity, memory, and the evolution of literary forms in India.

SAQ

1. How does the incorporation of dream sequences and surreal elements affect the reader's perception of reality versus imagination within the narrative? (150-200 words)
2. In what ways does the novel explore the limitations and possibilities of language, especially considering Barkotoki's notoriously illegible handwriting and the challenges it presents? (200 words)
3. What is the significance of the novel's title, *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*, in relation to the themes of identity, memory, and the search for truth within the narrative? (200 words)

8.8 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed Shisir Basumatari and his graphic novel *The Real Mr. Barkotoki*. For further reading, refer to the section below.

8.9 References and Suggested Readings

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