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Women writers writing on 'Peace': A Northeastern experience

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Abstract-

The present paper deals with the literary representation of the various dimensions of the issues of peace and conflict, in the backdrop of the volatile vicinity of Northeast India. In this process, six women writers from three different N.E. state are brought under discussion. Issues like peacebuilding mechanisms, identity, status of women in conflict situation, trauma, status of militarized and human security are brought under this discussion. In this process, perceptual and practical implications of the wider area of peace and conflict are examined through the tool of literary compositions. The paper specifically uses concepts and theories from the discipline of Peace and Conflict studies in the critical analysis.

Key Words – peace, conflict, violence, representation, security, identity, women

Introduction-

Literature is the unique tool which harvests its yield by navigating the raw experiential and existential dimensions of human reality at a micro and intangible domain. In societies with a protracted history of sociopolitical conflict, such as the Northeastern India, literature capture more naked and insightful glimpses of the invisible or what Martin Buber aptly calls as “hallowing the profane”. While academic or political writings on issues of peace or conflict concentrate on state centric policies, literary works (especially novels, short stories and poems) are rhetorical, reactionary and evaluative responses to the social phenomena. Peace and conflict



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are multidimensional, clustered issues that need introspective analysis of the ins and outs of such areas. It is generally accepted that psychosomatic and behavioural aspects, as well as structural conditions for alienation, combine to fuel conflict. Similarly, peace is also an umbrella concept as it extends from the stages very internal to the overtly external. Therefore, understanding of conflict or peace needs comprehensive, proper, evaluative study of all these interrelated issues and hence it should be interdisciplinary by nature. This interdisciplinary nature of the emerging area of research on peace or conflict is what justifies the inclusion of literary writings within this arena. Literary writings are humane approaches to record, examine, interpret and appraise responses and reactions towards issues of peace and conflict. Here lies the rationale of studying literature in studying peace.

Against this backdrop, the present paper tries to explore how a bunch of women writers from the Northeastern part of India is trying their best to promote peace through their writings, which basically avails in the form of short stories, novels and poems. Unlike the propaganda centric civil society workers, writers of this region silently portray the naked reality of the region's sufferings, record the perspectives of the common people, analyze the mistakes we committed and appeal for the rectifications for a conflict free society. On one hand they are documentative details of the various facets of the prevailing status of peace and conflict in the region and on the other hand they serve as morality tales of warning. These writers have been talking about the prolonged sufferings of the region which have always been remained as mere digression in the mainstream of the Indian nation-state – ironically, even in the mainstream arts that otherwise come across as very charged and political. Writings of six women writers from three different states of Northeast have been used for this paper.

The writers-

Since the later part of the twentieth century, Northeast India has been witnessing the emergence of a powerful group of writers, writing respectively in their vernacular languages as well as in English. Against the endless prejudices about this “anthropologists’ paradise”, these



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“contemporary writing from the Northeast shows what an exciting place it is to be in: backed by a strong, vibrant literary tradition, and surging with fresh ideas.” (Gill: 2009). Majority of their works deals with the volatile socio-political conflict and its consequences. In a region where violence and oppression are legitimized by the power, these writers have been trying to portray the reality of violent conflict and to repair the torn social fabric by pointing out the mistakes and miscommunications where everyone has a share. In this paper, writings of Arupa Patangia Kalita, Ratna Bharali Talukdar (Assam), Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire (Nagaland), Irom Sharmila and Ningombam Sunita (Manipur) would be brought under discussion. All of them are sensitive and popular writers enjoying wide critical readership. All of them are honored with prestigious literary awards and their writings have attracted scholastic attention both nationally and internationally. While the writers share their commonality in dealing with the issues of conflict, violence, insurgency or sub-nationalism, they also have their distinctive characteristics in their narrative techniques, ideological overtone and perspectives towards the social upheavals. Besides their personal involvement in the phenomena of peace and conflict, memory, nostalgia, observation and analysis are found to build the foundation of their narratives.

Texts and Context- the basic areas-

What does constitute peace? What are the basic determinants of a peaceful existence? Do people know the difference between positive and negative peace? Are the peace making or peacebuilding mechanisms real catalysts of peace? Endless queries on peace make the term itself ambiguous and hazardous to define. In the context of Northeast India, peace turns out to be a more critically overloaded term as the region has experienced all types of conflicting occurrences leading to varied forms of violence. Hence, literature of Northeast is often generalized as “literature of terror”, “literature that is too conflict ridden”, “literature that depicts violence and rage”, “violence as a thematic interest” etc. (Longkumer 115). But if examined closely, we find that a constant effort for promoting peace has been tried throughout these writings. Major issues of conflict have been checked and cross-checked, the real status of the security measures have been evaluated, the sham and petty hypocrisies of power game are exposed and measures of



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peacebuilding (governmental or non-governmental) have been examined objectively. Thus the question of peace has been examined and re-examined from all possible angles. These literary texts act as the guardians by stating the truth and prompting us to learn from the mistakes. The paper would highlight some of these attempts.

1.1. Critique of Peacebuilding strategies in Northeast

Felanee, the protagonist of the novel *Felanee* by Arupa Patangia Kalita, dismissing the logic for a separate Bodoland, tells to her fellowman-“What will you get in your own state? Have not you seen the predecessors? They have turned the entire state into a graveyard in the name of a golden state...let burn everything again, let everything be burnt away” (pp.175). This statement reveals the futility of the so called peacebuilding strategies opted in the region. Northeast India has undergone numerous peacebuilding mechanisms in the form of peace accords, ceasefire, autonomy grants, territorial arrangements etc. But do these mechanisms really bring peace. In the above quoted statement, Felanee exposes the gap between the reality and projections of Assam Accord. It was nothing but sheer passion that dominated the movement. People of the periphery hardly came to know what the accord offered for them. Irom Sharmila, in her poems, shows how the common people of Manipur do not even know the full form of AFSPA (Armed Force Special Power Act). Stories like *Khongji Makhol* and *Ngairi Ngasisu* by Ningombam Sunita reflect the necessity of cross community dialogues before designing a peacebuilding strategy. Respective governments hardly offer any space for the common people to take part in the decision making processes of peacebuilding. So, in spite of a long list of peace accords being implemented in Northeast, youth of an ethnic group of the region can easily proclaim the formation of a new extremist group. “Peace has not come to our lands. Young men continue to be indoctrinated into one fictional ideology or another ... Now peace seems as remote a dream as sovereignty.” (Kire 319). In spite of having a lucrative amount for the resettlement and rehabilitation of the conflict victims of Bodoland, Garati Murmu of Bismuri camp from *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo* by Ratna Bharali Talukdar, was compelled to send her daughter Sorla to Delhi



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to work in a “placement service” though she obviously knew that it would be nothing but prostitution.

Peacebuilding cannot be an alienated, scholastic policy agenda for a multiethnic social setting like Northeast. Most political scientists today emphasize the importance of states being embedded in society in determining their capacity to implement policy agendas. State capacity is not just a function of autonomy from societal influences; state capacity is significantly enhanced when an autonomous state is embedded in society through networks connecting state and society (Evans1995). Yet neither the state governments nor the central government ever try to link the expectations of the common people with their peacebuilding agendas. Hence, peacebuilding in Northeast hardly leads to peace. All these writers bring to book the gap between the agendas and their implementation by drawing out the ignorance of the common mass about such provisions. They clearly prove how resolution methods of conflict in Northeast are nothing but ‘...manipulative search for an agreement that is satisfactory not merely to the adversaries, but also the third party and latent interests they represent...Commitment to social change and reform –mediation as a social movement-has been abandoned in favor of the search for atomized processes seeking agreements that provide superficial solutions to individual problems confronted in isolation.’ (Mitchell 2002). The resolution process adopted in Assam movement seems to be infected with this limitation. Assam Accord is undoubtedly a calculative exercise for the central position as well as for a small group of the movement leaders who just yearned for political power. To deal with the troubled north-east region, India has counter-insurgency strategy, an economic development strategy and even a vacuous nation-building strategy. What it sorely lacks is a thoughtful state-building strategy- one that could link state and society in a way that harmonizes the interests, cultural values and aspirations of the peoples of the region with the agendas of the national state (Baruah, 2002).

1.2.Insecured security



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Ratna Bharali Talukdar, in her *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo* narrates the tragic story of the brutal rape of innocent Bodo girls of Bhumka village by the security personnel of Indian army. Instead of taking any steps for granting them justice, the Bodo movement leaders shamelessly used the incident to establish the nascent movement in the national scenario. Military forces deployed for the security of the common people of the region turn out to be the major reason of insecurity and harassment for them. In *The Last Song* by Temsula Ao, readers find how the women members of a family undergo fear psychosis of the militaries. The extremely pitiable condition of law and order in these places and the manipulation of power and law by the Army is what this story is about. In *The Curfew Man*, Ao again portrays how the normalcy of life of the common mass was completely shattered due to the rivalry between the underground forces and the armies. Even the fundamental necessities of human life were rejected in such situations.

“Of these, the night curfew was the worst for people living in towns because soon after dark all social activities ceased, even church services or social gatherings had to be concluded before the curfew hour began. There were stories about how people carrying the sick to the hospital or in search of doctors were stopped and subjected to humiliating searches causing unnecessary, and sometimes even fatal days...there were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol parties after curfew and their deaths reported as those of underground rebels killed in encounters with the army.”(pp.230).

Indian army appears more dangerous than the separatist extremists in Manipur. Irom Sharmila's poem *that cane of the policeman!* depicts a day when an innocent rickshaw man was ruthlessly assaulted by the policeman. The victim and the onlookers are muted by the authority. She writes:

“I came back with a heavy heart that day whose creation could have made it possible

The policeman's cane I saw that day”.



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Or

“...never a sweet song of lullaby
but the wailing of mothers
their children ripped from their breasts
women separated from their men
the widows' lament of despair
drawn by hands lads clad in olive green”

(Unbind me)

Lives of common man in Manipur turn out to be like lives of the fishes in aquarium dangled between the atrocities of the extremists and the armies. Easterine Kire, in her *Our Story* reminds the readers of the brutal rape of five Naga girls by Indian Army upon the altar of the Yankeli village church.

“Tears of a people forced
To witness the methodical
Desecration of their God's abode
By the pain, the blasphemy
Of their virgins done to death
Upon the altars of churches
Transformed
by India's soldiers to altars of lust.

(Our Story)

The traditional concept of militarized security for peace is thus nullified by these writers. While the state agencies still believe in the power of traditional security, the region hardly enjoys peace through this system. Instead of assuring security and peace, forces deployed for controlling of law and order situation of the region turn out to be traumatic entities for the common mass.



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These writers hence question the traditional system of assuring peace through militarized security. Rape and other forms of physical assault on innocent women, particularly in the tribal areas of the states make the entire arrangement of peace a farce. Northeast has enough instances where the women have been threatened, their mobility has been curtailed and women are used as human shield by army. There are countless allegations of custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, random checks, arbitrary arrest, kidnapping, coercive interrogation, torture, extrajudicial killings disguised as armed exchanges (“encounter killings”) with combatants. Arupa Patangia in her *Arunimar Swadesh* recounts how the Assamese society had to face a phase of parallel violence- violence of the extremist groups and violence of the army and military. No state of emergency or emergency law can supersede the fundamental right to life. But human rights, often projected to be the key element of fight against terrorism is what violated in the extreme extent by the security forces in Northeastern states.

The psychological distance between the security forces and the common people barely fulfil the conditions of collaboration and inclusion, the basic necessities of peacebuilding. Protracted or violent conflict leave behind not only physical destruction and institutional disarray, but also a torn social fabric characterized by mistrust, apprehension and massive difficulties in even imagining the possibility of working together towards common goals. In such a situation, forces deployed with a promise to assure peace, should be able to win the faith of the common mass. But, in Northeast, Indian army turned to be the symbol of fear and trauma, somewhat of a phobia for the laymen. On such a situation, securitization of peace becomes itself insecure. Through their poignant tales of anger, resentment and psychosis, Northeastern writers appeal the world to opt for the holistic approach of peace for this region.

Along with the exposure of the failure of militarized security, these writers also take a look into the aspects of human security, especially on the provision of the health security of this hostile region. Due to prolonged violence thousands of people have to reside in the refugee camps-make shift arrangements for the displaced victims of ethnic conflict. Neither the



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governments have any planned policy for rehabilitation and resettlement nor do they arrange medical facilities. In *Jerei Hagramaya Gabo* we find how an Adivasi woman gave birth to her child inside the camp, without slightest medical facility. In front of the eyes of the protagonist, she ferociously keeps shouting for medical help. There was neither an ambulance for her nor was a single nurse there to help. The last shelter was *jangli ousudh* (traditional medicine made out of wild plants). Whether it is a case of malaria, diarrhea or pregnancy, residents of the camp have to depend only upon such local medicines which often leads to death (pp.87.). The horrible description of the refugee camps in *Felanee* laughs at the scholastic jargons over human security, “The pit latrines in the camps had also disappeared. People started using the open areas to defecate and a horrible stink pervaded the whole place. White worms covered this filth. It became even worse once the rains came” (Kalita 43). The poor state of sanitation and hygiene arrangement is a big issue for the displaced persons. There is a lack of infrastructure, of adequate facilities, of health personnel, and most of the centre’s much-hyped health schemes remain just on paper with few being able to access these.

1.3. Identity Revisited-

Discourse on conflict of Northeast India centre round the issue of identity. Almost all the separatist or ethnic conflicts of this multicultural society are rooted on the issue of assertion of identity of varied ethnic groups. Issues of relative deprivation, inequality in distribution of resources, cultural divisiveness instigate the need to rethink about identity- to think more about “I”, “We” and “They”. In this process of identity formation, culture and collective consciousness plays an important role to bring out how someone is different from another and also how it can be asserted visibly. But, in most cases, identity is found to be misused in the bitter way leading to escalated violence. While practising the process of othering (objectification of another person or group or creating them as other, most frequently inferior), individuals or groups often opt for annoying tactics of stereotyping, indifference and abuse, aggressive nationalism, misinterpretation of culture and most frequently the use of physical violence. Though identity



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has been a focal issue of contemporary academics, they delimit their discussion over relation between identity and social movement, process of identity formation or cultural dimensions over identity.

But do we ever question ourselves about the legitimisation of violence for asserting our identity. Scholastic writings hardly question the need of self-criticism on the issue of identity. But these writings are always conscious of this aspect of identity. While the Northeastern region has undergone the atrocities of the state sponsored security forces, in house rivalries among the so called sub nationalist forces also lead to innumerable sufferings. Easterine Kire's works reflect the unpleasant realities of life in Nagaland by highlighting the in-house rivalry and ideological differences that existed among the Naga brethren who fought for freedom. *A Naga Village to be remembered* is a bold statement on the misuse of power by the nationalist forces in the name of patriotism and liberty. In *Felanee* also we find the novelist questioning the unjust tendency of comparing one's identity as inferior or superior to others. Through Felanee-the protagonist, the novelist repeatedly warns against the precarious tendency of social comparison of one's identity. What is significant to be noted is that while identities differ, they cannot be categorised as inferior or superior. But this simple fact is not recognized in most cases and that is the reason why identities often become a source of conflict. There is a related issue that should be taken care of. The tendency to call up one identity as the master identity, be it the class, citizenship, race or religion and to treat other identities as secondary is a common and a constant problem. Identity constructed on passionate ground is futile and leads nothing but to anxiety. *Felanee* provides a sensitive portrayal of such issues-

‘Why hasn’t she been offered any treatment...She held up Felanee’s wrist with the white shell bangles, traditionally worn by married Bengali women, and asked “Is this the reason for neglecting her?” Another boy in a white coat flung angry words at her, “Why do you have such a soft spot for these people?”



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“Because they are human beings,” she retorted”. (pp. 31).

Manipulated utilisation of culture is a growing danger in the identity discourse. Collectives generally opt for cultural elements to legitimize their demand. An objective condition of socioeconomic deprivation leads the collective to pick up a visible, immediate and effective cultural element to announce their new demands and aspirations. Identity politics creates “new social movements,” collective initiatives that are self-reflexive and sharply focused on the expressive actions of collective members (Melucci 1989:60, 1997). Though culture, by virtue of being an aesthetic treasure house is a legitimized epitome of an identity, be it individual or collective, we often notice using (misusing!) cultural orientation for emotional support for an identity issue. Writings from this region are very much concerned about this erroneous handling of culture or cultural elements. Felanee was not treated in the hospital just because she wore some bangles, generally worn by the Bengalis, which was gifted by her beloved neighbour. In spite of her repeated refusal to go for a traditional outfit, Bulen (another major character in *Felanee*) insisted her to wear only *Dakhana* –the traditional Bodo female outfit.

“Try to understand Kurmani. You have Bodo blood in you, that is why I am telling you all this. Wear your own dress or else you will be finished. You will end up in ashes too- I tell you” (pp, 180). Wearing of their traditional outfit was made compulsory during the hostile days of Bodoland movement or the “Robin hood” governance of ULFA in Assam. Ironically, women have been the basic targets of punishment for its violation!

Underlining the futile rush over nationalism, Temsula Ao bluntly dismisses the aggressive ways to ascertain identity as it leads nothing but to affliction. In her preface to *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, the writer clearly states how in conflict, there is only sufferings—“On the contrary, what the stories are trying to say is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in Human terms”(Ao 3). The lack



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of objectivity in projection of an identity discourse, the overemphasized sentimentality and the calculative efforts to erase the history of harmony and peace disturb the writers. Identity without humanity is what makes the writers sad.

“What made you a killer?
Why rob someone of his vehicle
What gain you by torturing an effigy?
For a scrap of land you cannot take with you
Why fight like a brute
Is this your calling, my child?
A mother’s heart to shatter.”
(*Mother be ragged no more*)

These writers are also conscious of the difficulty over opting for a particular identity in a multicultural demography like Northeast. While people enjoy peace by asserting and enjoying their identity, the process often becomes violent in a multicultural ethnic setting due to the messy flexibility of alternatives.

1.4. Women and Peace-

There is a growing body of feminist discourse establishing that war and peace are gendered activities and women's experiences, responses and needs should be taken seriously while discussing issues of peace. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, “In war-torn societies, women often keep societies going. They maintain the social fabric. They replace destroyed social services and tend to the sick and wounded. As a result, women are the prime advocates of peace”. But these “prime advocates of peace” are hardly offered a share into the decision making process of peacebuilding though they are the worst victims in the conflict days. Unlike their male counterparts, women experience varied forms of atrocities ranging from sexual exploitation to



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psychological traumatising. Studies making visible the centrality of women's agency in various stages of a conflict or post conflict situation and the need to have women participate at the peace table are ignored by the traditional academic discourses. But the Northeast writers try their best to highlight this issue in different ways. Sometimes they try it by revealing the sufferings of women while sometimes they just speak it live and loud.

While women have to undergo all types of violence during the conflict days, they are easily pushed to the periphery in the time of a peace accord. There is a broad recognition among humanitarian and relief agencies that women bear the brunt of armed conflict. Empirical evidence shows that women will not receive their fair share without deliberate planning of gender sensitive relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. However, multi donor frameworks for building peace in war-torn societies, at best, insert gender-sensitive language and ignore it at the field level. There is the visibility of setting up gender focal points, but usually without resources and authority to effectively leverage the system. Consequently, they are set up to fail ((Manchanda 2005). Women suffer as woman, as mother, as daughter, as community member – they lose their properties, husbands, children and chastity. Scars of exploitation and unfortunate social stigma chase them for years. But while signing the agreements for peace, they are never remembered for a single discussion. In the non-state level, women of Northeast have been showing exemplary initiatives in the field of peacebuilding or conflict transformation. Meira Paibi, Naga Ho Ho, Beerubala Rabha, Mahila Shanti Sena, Irom Sharmila are renowned names for their continuous efforts for peace. But while signing an accord or making a pact with a separatist organisation, such women never got a chance to express their opinion. State agencies hardly care for adequate infrastructural or psychological arrangements for these female victims of conflict of the region.

“No, we don't have any emotion these days. We got some money as compensation as rape victims. That's all. Nothing more than this...leaders of the movement are now rulers. But if you ask anybody what we have got from them, all will say that we got nothing. We don't want money. But what about those culprits! Have those rapists been punished...everybody talks about



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justice when they visit our village...but all end in smoke. It hurts.’ (Talukdar 41). Absence of counseling mechanisms for the victims of this volatile vicinity is repeatedly highlighted by the writers and NGO reports. Women are recurrent victims of Post-traumatic stress disorder due to their prolonged exposure to brutality and proximity to torture. Women of entire Northeast have experienced countless PTSD symptoms. “Suddenly she got up and poured the hot water of the pot over the bright fire of the stove. The ashes hissed and flew in the air. Looking at the now defunct fire, Pomila started crawling on the floor. She was very careful, like a child testing the ground before crawling forward, as if she was surrounded on two sides by deep canals. If she was just a bit careless, she would fall inside. Crawling thus, she went to the corner of the room. Then she started rubbing her body all over, wriggling her body constantly. After sometime she was tired and started huffing and puffing. Her world was now a dark black patch interspersed with pools of blood” (Kalita, 32). But these women barely enjoy any counseling service, as the states do not provide any institutionalized trauma healing service. The loss that they face is not just emotional or physical but transfers into the economic and social spheres as well. Most women face a decline in social legitimacy and find themselves relegated to the fringes of society with no one to care for them or to speak on their behalf.

Emerging concern of trafficking and prostitution is another serious issue of impact of conflict upon women. Unimaginable poverty, lack of livelihood arrangement, inhuman condition of refugee camps, politics of compensation money, outsider migration and unreceptive social fabric compelled the vulnerable women to become easy prey to trafficking, prostitution and consequently STDs. “The feminization of the AIDS epidemic is becoming all too apparent and the increased vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS in situations of conflict is an area of growing concern to social and health activists. The presence of armed forces in large numbers also increases the demand for sex workers, and young women are sucked into this and become pawns in a larger brutal network that thrives on human misery and conflict. Human and drug trafficking proliferate with women and children being sent to other parts of the country. This is also as a



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result of the loss of other economic options and increased poverty as a result of longstanding conflict situations and their aftermath.”(Hajarika2011). *Bitter Womanhood, Felanee, Jerei Hagramaya Gabo, Khongji Makhol, Fragrance of Peace, Dawn, Ghar Ghar Kheliba aha, A Naga village to be remembered or Laburnum for my head* narrate naked realities of women in conflict and post-conflict situation and how situations compel them to opt for professions they never ever think about.

Conclusion

Amidst all atrocities and lamentation, people want peace. Efforts for peace basically aim at preventing the resumption or escalation of violent conflict in conflict-prone societies and establishing a durable and self-sustaining peace; addressing the underlying sources of conflict, building or rebuilding peaceful social institutions and values, including respect for human rights, building or rebuilding institutions of governance and the rule of law. Sustainable peace or positive peace, in the academic term, needs a wider initiative of objective examination of the root causes of violent conflict, rectification of the mistakes committed and supporting social capital to rebuild a broken society (Galtung, 1996). Despite passing through a hostile history of enmity, distrust, fragility and bloodshed, simultaneously the effort for peace in Northeast is also going on. These efforts teach the people of the region how difficult it is to attain “peace”. Conflict is a normal, ever existing, omnipresent social reality. So attaining peace cannot be an easy task. Terminologies may vary, but any effort for peace, whether it is peacekeeping, peacebuilding or conflict transformation cannot be a mechanically structured, secluded mechanism. Peace itself is an inclusive term grounded on the fundamental principles of participation, democracy, dialogue, transparency; human rights etc. Hence efforts for peace should also be supported with all these ideas.

Writings from Northeast are products of conflict. Once known for its natural beauty and cultural heritage throughout the world, Northeast gradually turned out to be “other territory” always famous for wrong reason. It consequently leads to the “exoticization” of the region’s



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literature as stereotyped representation of violence. But in reality, unlike the slogan initiatives of the state sponsored peacebuilders, writers of the region are promoting peace in a silent but more humane manner. They examine the crucial issues objectively and warn not to repeat the mistakes, rather to learn from it. The critical detachment from their creations help the writers to inspect the reality behind the conflict of the region and then to suggest the most effective way for peace. Instead of advising or recommending a fixed framework for achieving peace, these writings appeal the readers to scrutinize the critical issues first and then only to adopt a mechanism. Here is their uniqueness of promoting peace.

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