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## Reflections of Terror in Contemporary Women's Writing in India – West Bengal and Northeast India

The paper traces the salient features of contemporary women's writing in India, with particular reference to women writers of West Bengal and Northeast India. It evinces interest in selective texts of one woman writer from Bengal and three women writers from the Northeast articulating a gender perspective on global issues like terror, trauma or violence. It centres these female narratives that bring out a gendered viewpoint on terror. The writers chosen for the present study are – Mahasweta Devi's novella *The Mother of 1084*, Indira Goswami's short stories *The Journey* and *Parasu Pator's Well*, Temsula Ao's tale *Sonny* and Irom Sarmila's poetry anthology *The Fragrance of Peace*. All these four authors represent terror from four different ethnic cultures – Bengali, Assamese, Naga and Manipuri. They also articulate different situations or types of terror besides different reactions to terror. While Mahasweta Devi deals with Naxalite terror, Indira Goswami deals with Assam insurgency. Temsula Ao presents the conflict between the Naga militancy and the military. Irom Sarmila's activist poems reflect the history of the struggle against armed conflict and its impact on the life of rural communities. Mahasweta Devi discusses the politics behind terror; Goswami attempts to explore the humanitarian view of terror, Ao brings out the story of a 'convoluted politics of the ravaged land... in the self-diminishing moves and counter-moves of a people living in limbo'; and Sarmila views terror and peace process.

### I

Women's writing today has traversed horizons – from narratives centering woman as victim of patriarchal / cultural / racial / sexual oppression, to the gendering of life, environment, and world of politics, society and culture. The expansion of science, education, information technology and the opening of opportunities in different fields have enriched women's writing today. Women's new role as activists, artists,

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entrepreneurs, writers, media professionals, directors and film makers has also made a difference to women's writing.

Women's writing made a modest beginning way back in the 1960s and '70s, as an offshoot of the women's political movements. Women's political writings of the 1930s suffrage movement and writings of women writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Woolf became the touchstones of women's writing then. What began as a feminist attempt to spearhead the woman's liberation, gradually spread to become a grand attempt to give woman her own space in literature, art and all other walks of life. Today the global emphasis in women's writing has turned to re-mapping the position of women in all spheres where they have been marginalized. One can see these trends in contemporary Indian literatures as well.

In Indian literature/s, the genre of women's writing has given rise to sub-genres like ethnic writings (dalit/tribal/etc), postcolonial writings, writings on partition and violence, diasporic literature, activist writings, etc. Women's writing in India today has entered the arena of politics, history, science, culture and society, from its earlier mode of traditional portrayals of women in families, and its later mode of a feminist anti-patriarchal interpretation and reassertion of the female world. Women's writings related to any contemporary issues – be that political conflicts, migration, trauma, terror, violence, or family – tend to nurture newer gender perspectives on modern life.

In West Bengal as well as Northeast India, literary writings reflect an awareness of topical issues and problems plaguing the contemporary society. In Bengal there are many women writers like Ashapoorna Devi, Mallika Sengupta, Mahasweta Devi and Rimi B. Chatterjee and interestingly there are also many women writers of Bengali origin writing in English like Bharati Mukherjee, Taslima Nasrin, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Monica Ali, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni and Tanika Gupta. Amongst them Mahasweta Devi stands out with her activist writings that reflect an oppressive and exploitative society that victimizes the tribals and other marginalized communities. Her writings on Naxalite movement are given particular emphasis in this article, since they are seminal writings that exemplify the woman writer's role as a social activist.

In Northeast India, women writers are increasingly taking to writing in English as well as translating from the local languages/cultures of the region. Today there are many upcoming women writers writing in English as well as regional languages in the Northeast. The major women writers are Indira Goswami, Anuradha Sharma Pujari, Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan. There are many new writers too like Easterine Iralu, Arupa Patagia Kalita, Manorama Das Medhi, Jahnvi Baruah, Indrani Raimedhi, Daisy Hasan, Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi, Rita Choudhury, Samudra Gogoi, and Nitoo Das. There are several reasons for this upsurge in literary writings by women in the Northeast. Firstly, their writings are the expression of an underrepresented region. Remaining as a colonial construct for a long time, the Northeast was politically kept separated from the mainland, thus leading to its anonymity and its cultural stereotyping as an insurgent prone region. Secondly, in their search for representation of their pre-colonial roots, these writers represent multiplicity of ethnic and non-ethnic voices that reflect diverse cultures, languages, histories and heritages, with the term 'Northeast' being only a geographic term uniting these writers. Thirdly, their writings also create what Mitra Phukan calls as a 'North-Eastern Diaspora', with many of these writers writing, from Bangalore and other Indian cities, their 'memories' of Assam, Shillong, etc. Fourthly, their writings also represent a search for a solution to the political turmoil in their troubled zones. As Preeti Gill points out, 'telling their stories is a form of political intervention, a way to open up a little known region and an alienated people'<sup>1</sup>. Then women's writing in the region also reveals itself as a piece of activism and terror memoir as seen in Irom Sarmila's poems of peace activism (*The Fragrance of Peace*) and Samudra Gogoi's work *A Former ULFA Member's Memoir*. In each of these writers mentioned here one finds what is described here below:

In many ways, women writers around the world use words just for the very reason this fabled storyteller did – to put off death for another day, a death which is not literal as in her case, but a death-in-life, resulting from the loss of her power of self-expression, fearing the silencing of her literary voice that not only speaks of her torment and elation but also of her angst and protest against any form of oppression, whether by an individual, societal mores or state authority.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper evinces interest in selective texts of one women writer from Bengal and three women writers from the Northeast articulating a gender perspective on global issues like terror, trauma or violence. It centres these female narratives that bring out a gendered viewpoint on terror. It attempts to study select literary writings of four women writers – Mahasweta Devi (*The Mother of 1084*), Indira Goswami (*The Journey and Parasu Pator's Well*), Temsula Ao (*Sonny*) and Irom Sarmila (*The Fragrance of Peace*). All these four authors represent terror from four different ethnic cultures – Bengali, Assamese, Naga and Manipuri. They also articulate different situations or types of terror besides different reactions to terror. While Mahasweta Devi deals with the state-programmed terror vis-a-vis Naxalites, a banned left-wing militant group in India, Indira Goswami details the state of Assam, now in the grip of the struggle of different ethnic insurgent groups fighting against the Indian State. Temsula Ao gives a very matter of fact presentation of the conflict between the Naga militancy and the military that destroyed the normal way of living. Irom Sarmila's activist poems reflect the history of the struggle against armed conflict and its impact on the life of rural communities. Mahasweta Devi discusses the politics behind terror, while Goswami attempts to explore the humanitarian view of terror, Ao brings out the story of a "convoluted politics of the ravaged land...in the self-diminishing moves and counter-moves of a people living in limbo"<sup>33</sup>.

## II

Mahasweta Devi's novella *Mother of 1084* is about a woman's gradual awakening to the social and political realities around her, with her stirring activated in the first place by the sudden death of her son, a Naxalite, in police encounter. A story told in media through a series of flashbacks and memory recalls, it is about a woman's coming to terms with the trauma of the horrific death of her son, in the milieu of the Naxalbari uprising in the state of West Bengal in India in the early 1970s.

What is known as Naxalite movement is a left-wing extremist movement that began in Naxalbari, a village in northern West Bengal, as peasant uprising against poverty, exploitation and social discrimination. It then spread to the cities and gained support among the educated and unem-

ployed youth, disillusioned with inefficient and corrupt government policies and dreamt of establishing a socialist state through armed revolution. The Indian State passed a series of black acts empowering the police to arrest any person on mere suspicion, and resorted to torture and fake encounters. Even today Naxalites, who now call themselves as Maoists, enjoy popular support among the poor tribals, peasants, lower castes and landless labourers in about seven states in India. The Government of India has declared them as terrorists and views them as the biggest threat to the Indian State.<sup>4</sup>

Mahasweta Devi's long tale begins with Sujata's (the female protagonist) search for the truth behind her son Brati's death. The search launches her on the path of her meeting and forming close affinities with two women linked to her son. This meeting with the two women, Sonu's mother, who has also lost her son in the same police encounter, and also Nandini, Brati's girl friend and comrade, changes her. Sujata grows from a patient, sympathetic and sensitive mother to a silent dissenter against the amoral and indifferent upper middle class lifestyle of her family members including the attitudes of her husband, Dibyanath, who considers the dead son only as an embarrassment. More than the shock of the news that her son lies in the morgue as 'corpse 1084', what irks her more is the nexus between her husband and the police responsible for the son's death, and also Dibyanath's pseudo values that make him use his 'connections' to prevent the appearance of Brati's name as a Naxalite in the newspapers. Sujata's recognition that her son died for a social cause leads her also to the painful realization that his death meant nothing to a snobbishly conscious but indifferent society of onlookers. Such an acumen about the futility of dying for a faceless society helps a voiceless woman to regain her voice. Sonu's mother and Nandini, the two female voices that enlighten her on the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed, act as catalysts in Sujata's journey towards the female awareness. Sujata realizes that Brati was the soul of her life and yet she knew neither him nor his struggle to uproot a system that impoverished the innocent and the poor. Hence at the end of the story, Sujata becomes a new revolutionary mother, proud to be 'the mother of the corpse number 1084.'

Mahasweta Devi creates three women characters belonging to three different cultures – Sujata (middle class), Somu's mother (lower class) and Nandini (upper class), who represent three different reactions to terror – Sujata's changing voice from ignorance through knowledge to awakening towards issues of terror and counter terror, Somu's mother's voice as helpless witness to terror and Nandini's voice as the insider of terror. All three voices represent woman at the receiving end and woman in the marginalized position caught in the politics of terror. Mahasweta Devi takes a revolutionary stand supporting the Naxalite cause and also condemning the state's counter offensive measures. Nandini's description of the state apathy rings true here: 'Nothing's changed. Thousands of young men rot in the prisons without trials, they are denied the status of political... Torture continues with greater sophistication and more secrecy'. Sujata's cry of protest against her family at the end of the story stages the awakened woman's reaction to terror and the awareness of the cause of terror of her Naxalite son and his companions.

### III

Indira Goswami is a renowned Assamese writer, teacher and activist, noted for her novels and short stories on Assamese life and issues of insurgencies and terror. To understand the terror situation of Assam portrayed by Goswami, one needs to start with roots of terror and militancy in India's northeastern states since the colonial times.

Northeast India, inhabited by several indigenous ethnic communities, has several ethnic insurgencies fighting either for autonomy within India or for independence from India. Lack of emotional integration with mainland India, economic underdevelopment, demographic imbalance created by immigrants and political indifference of the state to the fears and concerns of the people of the region are cited as the causes for the rise of ethnic insurgencies in the region. Goswami's short story *Parasu Pator* revolves around the Assamese society, now in the hold of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies in the northeastern state of Assam, following the rise of United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The outfit was raised by a handful of dedicated youth who believed that the only solution to people's problems in Assam lay in establishing a sovereign Assam. Ini-

tially the outfit enjoyed the support of a large section of Assamese youth in the countryside. Then their popularity declined partly because of their involvement in terrorist activities. The Indian State banned this organization, labeling it as a terrorist outfit. Often there were attempts to negotiate with the outfit. The author, Goswami acted as a mediator between the government and the militant outfit. The peace negotiations yielded no results, because of the obstinacy of both the parties. In the recent years one faction of ULFA has come forward to negotiate with the government, while another faction continues its underground struggle. Yet the author looks forward to success of peace negotiations in Assam. Her two stories, *Parasu Pator's Well* and *Journey* are written in the backdrop of ULFA insurgency in Assam.

*Parasu Pator's Well*, a story based in Lakhimpur, Assam, is concerned with the struggle of an unemployed youth Parasu Pator, trying desperately for self-employment. Parasu endlessly struggles to apply for a contract in the Sericulture Department to dig a well in a village for the purpose of clean water storage. Though he succeeds after great difficulty in obtaining the contract, his sorrows multiply in the form of his continuous failure to find water even after digging wells of unfathomable depths in different places. He is deeply in debt, amidst the paucity of funds for the medical treatment of his sick brother suffering from cancer. The story of a young man's struggle for employment is told while intermittently expressing his constant temptation to join the ULFA militant outfit and abandon his hard labor. Though terrorism only forms the backdrop of the story, it nonetheless looms large in the protagonist's mind and his external world of friends succumbing to terrorist ideology.

The Assamese youth's dilemma or his 'difficult choice' gives the complication to an otherwise simple tale: "In fact he had half of a mind to join them [his friends]. He knew the deep jungles where they were being trained in the use of arms and in warfare"<sup>6</sup>. However much Parasu struggles to make both ends meet, he fails miserably, and when that happens he is tempted to flee to the terrorist inhabited jungles: "The clods of earth scattered in the paddy fields seemed like the helmets of dead soldiers in a battlefield. It was as if everything, nature itself, was conspiring to drag Parasu into some unknown, dreaded cavern!"<sup>7</sup>. When finally he

succeeds in his venture, he is left with no money for his brother's treatment and for retrieving his mother's gold earring, with his purse drained in satisfying the corrupt officials and the well diggers. He is left wondering: "Had he done the right thing in borrowing all that money for the well, when his brother needed him so badly? Should he have joined his friends – Moina, Haibor, Jogesh – and gone to Charaipung? Maybe he should have. At least there would have been no dearth of money for Damodar's treatment. Their mother would have been saved a lot of trouble and heartache. Maybe..."<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless he discards his friends' invitation to join militancy and chooses to struggle and face the debts he had taken from the moneylender Pathan. Parasu would have succumbed to militancy but for the so called wicked Pathan, the immigrant moneylender turning kind enough to waive the debt, after visiting him and seeing Parasu's pathetic poverty-stricken conditions and the plight of his sinking brother.

The above story brings out the author's critical examination of terrorism as an economic option available to the Assamese youth in the corrupt social, economic and political milieu. An examination of Parasu's world also allows the author to touch upon the degeneration of the Assamese society, as seen in the portrayal of the corrupt government officials, and also the violence lurking in the army officials, who deliberately kill Parasu's friend Bhola and his girlfriend Bakul in an encounter, even though they knew that Bakul was trying to bring Bhola back from the clutches of ULFA to the mainstream.

At the outset Goswami's perspective on terrorism is gendered in the sense that she views the young protagonist's strength as something due to the emotional support and understanding from the female member of the family, viz his mother. Secondly Goswami reveals how Parasu's faith in humanity is restored at the end, when he receives help from Pathan the 'foreign' moneylender, proving wrong the anti-immigrant stand of the Assam militants who hold that 'foreigners' are responsible for their plight. Such an effort to view the kindness of the moneylender, an 'outsider' in the eyes of the Assamese society, reveals the writer's effort at 'border crossing', something typical of women's writing.

While *Parasu Pator's Well* makes a critical examination of a youth

resisting terror in a terror-ridden society and his family cooperating in his struggle, the other story, *Journey* examines terror from the point of view of the family affected by a young family member joining militancy. In the beginning of the tale, the narrator, obviously the author here, listens to the discussions on terrorism between the driver and her colleague from Delhi University, on their way back from Kaziranga, one of the world famous national parks in India. She seeks to divert attention from terrorism's grave reality through remembrance of pleasant memories of Kaziranga: "I sat in the car, looking out of the window. Trying to imagine myself back on the verandah of the Kaziranga tourist lodge, listening to the wind making the thick clumps of *bijuli* bamboo rustle as if it were *muga* silk. I remembered the moon spotlight a huge owl that sat on a chatyan tree, its head disproportionately large, like that of a newborn baby."<sup>9</sup> However, the narrator is led gradually to face terrorism as a reality in due course, when she encounters an old couple owning a tea shop, where they stop by to wait till their broken car could be repaired. The narrator then gradually becomes aware of the family's dire poverty and miserable conditions they live in from the following information: the escape of the son to join militancy, the daughter's affair with a CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) soldier, her pregnancy and the Assamese youth's scoffing her affair due to their hatred for the Indian Army. The narrator pleased with the brief but beautiful respite in their humble environment offers perks for the tea they offered. The narrator derives pleasure from the old couple's company and she in turn takes pleasure in helping the needy. But her joy does not last long, since there is an intrusion from the militant son, who pounces on the money 'like a vulture.' The militant's interference at one level reveals his hatred for the 'Indian soldier' and his intention to purchase an American second hand gun with the money he grabs.

What is interesting is the gendered perspective of the narration at this moment, when the narrator is left to sense the sudden disappearance of the rustic beauty of Assam and the simplicity of its people: "Mirajkar and I resumed our journey toward Guwahati. Neither of us spoke. It was as if we were travelling through a dark tunnel, endlessly"<sup>10</sup>. The image of a dark endless tunnel contrasts the majestic beauty of Kaziranga, and it also reveals in a metaphorical way, a sense of hopelessness for the future of Assam.

Goswami's ecosensitivity and ecological perspective of terror could be identified in her juxtaposition of the images of terror and images of Kaziranga's beauty. The aura of Kaziranga's flora and fauna, Assamese folklore and music offer temporary relief from the reality of terror, which the narrator has to face anyway. The author not only brings out an ecological awareness but also a sense of nostalgia for the fast perishing world of innocence and purity that terrorism threatens to vanquish forever.

In her choice for the first tale to centre a young man's struggle amidst the terrorist environment and also in her decision for the second tale to underline the victimization of the family in the wake of militancy, Goswami initiates a new kind of gendered discourse on terror. Here there is no attempt at 'writing the self, nor a passive feminist position of a female-centered sympathetic account of terror, but rather a female author viewing terror from a humanist angle.

#### IV

Temsula Ao, poet, novelist, short story writer, university professor and Padmashree, has several collections of poetry and also short stories. Her short fiction has a breezy fragrant style that walks her images of Nagaland through a narrative characterized by a genuine touch of simplicity and a female approach to life.

The Nagas were the first ethnic community in Northeast India to take to insurgency with the objective to establish a sovereign state of Nagalim. The movement was started by Naga National Council under the leadership of Phizo in 1950s. The following quotation expresses the mood of the Nagas then:

The Naga militants mobilized the Nagas against the Indian State with the avowed objective of establishing a sovereign Naga nation. They had such a faith in their ability to build their own independent state that they viewed all those individuals – Nagas as well as Indians who expressed doubts about the desirability and possibility of a sovereign Nagaland as their enemies or traitors to their cause<sup>11</sup>.

However, the state repression and the internal rivalries among the Nagas led to splits in the movement. Today there are four factions working toward the same cause. More than the armed repression by the Indian State, the internal factional fights among different Naga militant outfits have taken a heavy toll on Naga life. The writings by writers of Nagaland, especially those of Temsula Ao reflect the anxieties and dilemmas of the Naga movement.

Ao's short story "Sonny" retells how the female protagonist's assiduously re-structured life is troubled by 'the murky politics of a contested land'. It deals with the process of a woman's coping with the death of her ex-lover, Sonny, who is a Naga militant, killed due to internal rivalry. What is interesting about the story is the female insider's perception of the whole Naga movement for independent statehood. This is perceived in the female narrator's description of the Naga movement at the time when her militant lover was courting her:

...those were also the exciting days of national fervor that caught the imagination of all and sundry both in the rural and urban populace. For the so-called educated elite of the towns, success of the movement meant setting up an independent country where the inequalities and injustices of the repressive 'occupation' forces would be eliminated. Not only that, many lent their support with an eye to personal gains in the new set up. But for the rural people, it was simply seen as an opportunity to return to the utopian state of self-rule before the alien rulers came and overturned their ancient way of life.<sup>12</sup>

If the above description provides a 'background casually' unwinding of the woman's view point of the Naga movement, the quotation below states the devastation it creates to ordinary citizens:

The call to the armed rebellion was like heady wine at first. But the retaliatory measures of the government forces blazed through the land like a wild fire, turning villages into burnt-out heaps and people into creatures herded into concentration-camp-like grouping zones. Families were separated, women were raped and killed and the men were forced to see the humiliation before they too were either maimed for life or simply killed. The stories filtering through the urban grapevine only added fuel

to the anger and hostility brewing in the minds of those pursuing higher education in various institutions in different cities.<sup>13</sup>

The above description has a journalistic style of retelling terror and violence and at the same time it also conveys an insider's view of a holocaust-like situation, as seen in how the rural Nagas are uprooted from their homes and how the public are wounded in the violent clashes between the army and the militants.

The narrator's attempt to trace her associations with her ex-lover Sonny, whom she believes, "would stand by his principles, come what may"<sup>14</sup>, expresses two angles on terror - political and personal - relevant to understand the woman's point of view on Naga militancy. The political viewing adopted by the author shows how she examines the weaknesses of the militant group torn by rivalry and selfish intention. Such a viewing by a female persona reveals the futility of factional fights on political grounds and the female understanding of the hostility that exists in the male dominated world. Hence the narration traces Sonny's recognition both inside and outside as a leader, as the root cause of rivalry against him, which consequently leads to his de-recognition from his seniors and also to his ultimate death:

*During those years, when the world was avidly following the career of a revolutionary called Fidel Castro and his friend and advisor Che Guevara, some of his admirers went to the extent of comparing Sonny to the enigmatic Che claiming that he was the real brain of the entire movement. This certainly did not endear him to the powers within the movement and from the moment he joined their ranks, he had to walk a tightrope in the multi-headed ideological minefield within.<sup>15</sup>*

Further her ironical examination of the militant conflict with an unknown enemy reveals an existential situation:

*...Sonny was entering into a twilight zone in the struggle for freedom where one could not identify the real enemy anymore, because the conflict was no longer only of armed resistance against an identifiable adversary; it had become an ideological battlefield within the resistance movement itself, posing new dangers from fellow national workers sup-*

posedly pursuing a common goal. And today Sonny had become a victim of his own convictions when the assassins pumped the bullets into a fellow fighter's bosom.<sup>16</sup>

When the narration switches from the political to personal, one identifies the female narrator's awareness of their love failing to culminate in marriage because of Sonny's dream for an independent country and his ultimate death in the hands of his own fellow militants: "When he quietly slipped away from my life into another sphere of existence, I was plunged into an abyss of self-doubt and self-recrimination for my obsessive love for a man who regarded his own nationalistic passion more important than the love of a woman."<sup>17</sup>

Thus the female narrator's outlook reveals the woman's political and personal view of terror. The personal view centers the female dreams about love, marriage and happiness and portrays how female dreams are shattered to pieces by militancy and also expresses the female protagonist's regret about it. Such an outlook opens up an alternative viewing. The political view of the author reveals a woman's point of view of what went wrong with an idealistic movement, internally cracked from within. Such an outlook opens up an idiosyncratic perception on militancy, neither pro or anti militancy, but an insider-outsider perspective that is interestingly level-headed and humane, similar to what is experienced in Goswami's narratives on militancy.

## V

Irom Sarmila is known for her contribution to the culture of peace and freedom in Manipur. Being on fast unto death the past 11 years, she has been fighting for the repeal of the draconian AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) in Manipur.

Manipur has been under the grip of different kinds of insurgent groups fighting for independence from India or for autonomy/separate state status within the Indian Union. In the name of tackling insurgencies, the Indian state has enacted draconian acts such as AFSPA which gives enormous powers to the armed forces to arrest and even kill any person

on mere suspicion. The face-off between the insurgent groups and the state armed forces has contributed to death of thousands of innocent lives in Manipur. The people experiencing encounters, tortures, kidnappings, arson and destruction had to live in perpetual fear. Irom Sharmila's fast for repeal of AFSPA is to be seen as a common man's urge for peace in Manipur.<sup>18</sup>

Irom Sarmila's maiden poetry collection *Fragrance of Peace* (2010) reveals that there are more dimensions to this female messenger of peace. The poems express a woman's anxiety over the land of 'Kanglei' (Manipur), and her visualization of her land as infested with death, conflict and violence due to insurgency and counter insurgency operations. At the same time they are also poems of strength, courage, determination never to cow down to pressure, patriotism, belief in god and trust in the honour of the land of Manipur. Irom Sarmila's poems enrich the female perspective of violence through her role as the female messenger of peace. Her title poem given below exemplifies the role of women in peace process and conflict resolution, through the use of body as a weapon to achieve peace and arouse patriotic fervor:

When life comes to its end  
 You, please transport  
 My lifeless body  
 Place it on the soil of Father *Koubru*  
 To reduce my dead body  
 To cinders amidst the flames  
 Chopping it with axe and spade  
 Fills my mind with revulsion  
 The outer cover is sure to dry out  
 Let it rot under the ground  
 Let it be of some use to future generations  
 Let it transform into ore in the mine  
 I'll spread the fragrance of peace  
 From *Kanglei*, my birthplace  
 In the ages to come  
 It will spread all over the world<sup>19</sup>

Her several other poems in this collection reveal the concern and de-

termination of the female persona to transform Manipur into an abode of peace. Her poem "Victorious worm" brings out the ethical dimension of power and authority, where the rule of a state in the wrong hands would breed only torture, violence and disruption of peace. In such a land there can be only 'enemies who won by sinning against the almighty' and she prophesies that for such wicked people "darkness prevails everywhere in the end".<sup>20</sup> Her yet another enthralling poem "Mother will be ragged no more" brings out a mother's woes for her son turned into a violent rebel. The poem sheathes the female persona's conflicting attitude to her son, whom she disapproves for his violence and deceit and at the same time loves him as her one and only child. Yet the resolution of this conflict is poignant when the unyielding female persona says,

but in sin you are encased  
my hand for you, I will no more hold out  
and my rags, worn for you  
never again will I touch  
don't be upset, my precious  
mother will be ragged no more<sup>21</sup>

Scenes of terror proliferate in her poem "Unbind me" which probably reflects the peacemaker's own struggle in the prison, where as a 'caged bird' she reflects her memory of violence:

...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<sup>22</sup>

The above poem particularly can be read in relation to her sole struggle with the Indian government echoing the demand of the women of Manipur to remove the army from the region. The army atrocity as an issue is addressed in her poem "That cane of the policemen." The poem poignantly recounts the scene of an innocent rickshaw puller beaten up by a policeman, with a truckload of policemen grinning at him. Sarmila's persona is left to ponder,

I came back with a heavy heart that day  
 whose creation could have made it possible  
 the policeman's cane I saw that day?<sup>23</sup>

Thus through her poems Sarmila is able to address the issues of ethnic conflict, armed forces atrocities and also female violence/rape/familial loss. Her poems highlight the fact that peace is the ultimate demand above all strives and that it is worth fighting for peace, rising above terror or violence.

## VI

From the above – mentioned women writers writing on insurgency, terror, violence and peace activism, one could come to following conclusions: First of all these writings set a model for a new genre of women's literature (can we call it women's activist literature?) that seeks to play a positive role to alleviate conflict and violence and to bring about harmony in the land of these writers. While politics could exclude women from the decision making process, it is these writings that become vehicles of women's political viewpoints and concern for peace. Women's literature as seen in these writings becomes a symbol of a slow revolution that is taking place in the process of woman's political interventions in peace process and reiterates the truth that woman no more remains 'her master's voice'<sup>24</sup>

The perspective one gets when one reads their works is that all the four writers view terror and violence as a threat to quotidian life. Their themes traverse from innocence to violence, trauma and militancy and even negative effects/impacts of terror on innocent people and even genuine revolutionaries. They render an awareness of the social roots of terrorism and also occasionally empathy with the militants. They rightly view terrorism as an offshoot of economic, political and social contradictions inherent in the modern world.

While recording their tales of terror, they interrogate the male centric views on terror. In a broader sense, these writers question the official interpretations of terror. Unlike the male writers who mostly tend to re-

flect on terror in a more mechanistic and professional manner, these writings show that their reflections on terror are viewed in the background of family relations, yearning for love and marriage, fear of separation from the loved ones and importantly, registering a female reaction to violence, rape and trauma. *Border crossing*, a metaphor of women's writing, is seen in all these works. These women writers tend to cross borders in all spheres – be it ethnic, class, regional, political. A money lender extending help to a man from ethnic group that hates him as a foreigner, proscribed love as seen in an Assamese woman in love with the man from the Indian army, a middle/upper class woman sympathizing with Naxalite movement, a woman trying to bring her boy friend in ULFA to the national mainstream, and middle class and rich woman identifying and empathizing with movements of the lower classes and castes, a mother's lament but yet unquenchable love for her militant son, Sarmila does not mind her dead body rotting, but nevertheless wishes that it spreads fragrance of peace in her local as well as broader universe, a mother's lament but yet unquenchable love for her militant son – are all instances of border crossings. Further, images of their native land – seen in descriptions of native landscapes or customs and cultures or scenes of its dismembering through violence and disturbances – abound so much in these women writers' works that, one concludes that these writers love their land and are pained by its mutilation through bloodshed. Their works reflect their love for home through their love for its landscape and its fertility.

Their approach to state and terrorism is intimately related to their concern for families and communities they live in. These women's texts and their choice of tales of terror told from the woman's point of view, indicate their gendered worldviews. At the same time challenging the existence of military in the region is an issue crucially handled by women's organizations here. The works of these women writers naturally contain this issue of militarization of the region. Hence woman's role in conflict resolution, peace process, and mitigation of violence or rehabilitation measures expressed through culture and literature is a recurrent phenomenon in the region.

The study above offers only a bird's eye view of a very powerful female literary landscape of the regions of West Bengal and Northeast

India that still needs to be meticulously explored, documented and researched. Women's writing in these regions can achieve the literary space, recognition and acclaim they deserve, only when more scholars are inspired to give room for scholarly discussion.

### Notes and References

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<sup>2</sup> Indrani Raimedhi, "Male Portrait – V", <http://www.assamtribune.com/aug0909/sunday3.html>. Accessed on 14.05.11.

<sup>3</sup> Temsula Ao, "Sonny", in Tilottoma Misra (ed.), *The Oxford Anthology of Writing from the North East – Fiction*, OUP, New Delhi, 2011, p.248.

<sup>4</sup> For understanding of Naxalbari struggle refer, Sumanta Bannerjee, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, Zed Books, New Delhi, 1984

<sup>5</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Mother of 1084*. Samik Bandyopadhyay trans., Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1997: p.36.

<sup>6</sup> Indira Goswami, "Parasu Pator's Well", Gayatri Bhattacharyya, trans, *Fresh Fictions: Folk Tales, Plays, Novellas from the North East*, Selected by North East Writers' Forum, Katha Books, New Delhi, 2005: p.117.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131.

<sup>9</sup> Indira Goswami, "Journey", From *Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami) and Her Fictional World – The Search for the Sea*, Compiled by Kaikous Burjor Satarawala, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2002: p.129.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.139

<sup>11</sup> H. Srikanth & C.J. Thomas, "Naga Resistance Movement and the Peace Process in North-East India", in Prasenjit Biswas & C. Joshua Thomas (eds.), *Peace in India's North-East - Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 353-82.

<sup>12</sup> T. Ao, "Sonny", *op. cit*, p.244.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Irom Chanu Sharmila, "Fragrance of Peace", <http://manipurfreedom.org/Poster>, 29.06.11.

<sup>19</sup> Irom Sarmila, "Fragrance of Peace", *Fragrance of Peace*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2010, p.25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, “Unbind me”, p.43.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, “That cane of the policemen”, p.22.

<sup>24</sup> Sajal Nag, “Her Master’s Voice”, in Prasenjit Biswas & C. Joshua Thomas (eds.), *Peace in India’s North-East - Meaning, Metaphor and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006: p. 208.

Note: The following books have also been referred:

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