Literary Enigma: ***The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture***
ISSN (Online): 3049-2033

Literary Enigma

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-reviewed and Indexed)

Vol. 1, Special Issue: 6 **June 2025**

Article No 23

1. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kohima Campus, Nagaland University (A Central University)

Page No: 139-148

Cooking the Self: Food, Identity, and Resistance in the Writings of Ao, Kire, and Dai

Dr Subhashis Banerjee

Abstract

Food is not merely a biological necessity but a powerful symbol that embodies the socio-cultural, historical, and political ethos of a community. In the context of Northeast India, a region defined by its ethnic diversity and indigenous epistemes, food practices reveal a significant cultural topography. This paper explores food as a cultural marker and a site of identity formation, resistance, and memory among the indigenous communities of the Northeast. Through a postcolonial literary lens, the study investigates the representations of food in select Northeast Indian literary texts, highlighting how culinary traditions are intricately tied to land, cosmology, and social belonging. Drawing upon authors such as Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, and Mamang Dai, this paper argues that indigenous foodways function not only as traditional practice but also as a resilient counter-narrative to colonial modernity and cultural erasure.

Keywords: Foodways, Postcolonialism, Indigenous Literature, Northeast India, Cultural Identity

Literary Enigma: ***The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture***
ISSN (Online): 3049-2033

Cooking the Self: Food, Identity, and Resistance in the Writings of Ao, Kire, and Dai

Introduction

In the intricate socio-cultural landscape of Northeast India, food assumes a role far beyond its nutritional function. It operates as a profound cultural signifier, reflecting the values, rituals, historical trajectories, and identities of the region's many indigenous communities. This borderland territory, marked by ethnic diversity and linguistic multiplicity, is home to over two hundred tribes, each with distinct culinary traditions that have evolved in consonance with their specific environmental and cosmological conditions. In this milieu, food does not merely satiate hunger; it serves as a script through which tradition is narrated, resistance is articulated, and cultural memory is preserved.

Food's centrality in indigenous lifeways is deeply linked to the ecological particularities of the region. The hilly terrain, thick forests, and riverine systems have given rise to subsistence practices that include foraging, jhum cultivation, animal husbandry, fermentation, and preservation. These techniques are embedded in oral instructions, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and community-based labour systems. Temsula Ao remarks that among the Nagas, food is not merely consumed but celebrated as part of social identity, and this celebration is often embedded within communal feasts, harvest rituals, and rites of passage (Ao, *These Hills* 87). Such practices, when disrupted by colonial and postcolonial processes of modernisation, migration, and religious conversion, provoke a form of cultural dislocation that indigenous writers frequently register in their narratives.

Indigenous literature from Northeast India, especially by women writers such as Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mamang Dai, foregrounds food as a symbolic and material artefact. Their texts serve as decolonial repositories where food becomes a cipher for identity, gender roles, and spiritual cosmologies. In *Bitter Wormwood*, Kire depicts the anguish of displacement and insurgency in Nagaland, where the loss of traditional foodways parallels the erosion of cultural roots. A character reminisces about the simple pleasure of eating sticky rice and pork cooked in bamboo tubes—a culinary memory that evokes home, safety, and cultural belonging (Kire, *Bitter Wormwood* 59). This is not just nostalgia, but a political gesture that asserts indigenous subjectivity in a region historically marginalised by both colonial authorities and the postcolonial Indian state.

The use of food in literature to represent resistance and survival is notably present in Mamang Dai's works. Her novel *The Black Hill* situates food within a matrix of ecological spirituality and historical displacement. Set against the colonial backdrop of 19th-century Arunachal Pradesh, the narrative interlaces tales of forest-dwelling tribes who understand the forest not as a resource to be exploited but as a living entity that reciprocates care through herbs, fruits, and game (Dai, *The Black Hill* 112). Through this, Dai asserts a worldview that is in direct opposition to colonial materialism and extractivism. The protagonist's relationship with food becomes emblematic of her bond with the land and its metaphysical essence.

Likewise, in *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai constructs a world where food, myth, and medicine intersect. Recipes in the text are not merely culinary but serve as mnemonic devices—channels through which ancestral wisdom is transmitted and reaffirmed. An old woman tells her grandchild that "each herb has a story, and if you forget the story, the herb loses its power" (Dai, *Pensam* 94). This line resonates with Walter Mignolo's call for an epistemic decolonisation that honours local knowledge systems, particularly those encoded in oral traditions and everyday practices like cooking and healing. Such literature challenges dominant paradigms that associate literacy with textuality alone.

Food also becomes a means of articulating gendered agency in indigenous literature. As primary caregivers and cooks, women are often the preservers of tribal food knowledge, which also makes them the bearers of cultural memory. Temsula Ao, in *Laburnum for My Head*, explores how women mediate generational wisdom through everyday acts like

fermenting bamboo shoots, brewing rice beer, and preparing smoked meats (Ao 66). The character of the elderly widow in "A Respectable Woman" embodies this intersection between food and feminine identity, where her refusal to abandon traditional culinary practices becomes an act of defiance against societal modernisation and moral judgment (Ao 65). In this way, food serves not only as sustenance but also as a cultural artefact that inscribes identity onto the body and the community.

The postcolonial theoretical framework, particularly that of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, provides useful tools to examine these literary tropes. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" posits that cultural meaning is always negotiated, hybrid, and performative. In Northeast Indian literature, food becomes such a third space—a domain where colonial, indigenous, and modern forces collide and coalesce. The hybridity of food—say, a fusion of traditional meat with market-bought condiments, or a ritual feast served in a missionary school context—embodies this negotiation. Rather than being a diluted version of tradition, such hybridity reflects adaptation, resilience, and agency.

Furthermore, Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" who is often denied a voice in dominant discourse can be reimagined through the lens of food. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist, a forest-dwelling hunter, survives on wild food like fern leaves and river fish—an act that aligns him with a vanishing indigenous epistemology (Kire 45). His story may not be heard in urban policy circles or nationalist histories, but in his preparation of food and his rituals of eating, he affirms an existence that defies assimilation.

The significance of food as a literary and cultural marker also extends to memory and trauma. The culinary memory of smoked beef or fermented yam, evoked during moments of displacement or bereavement, becomes a vessel through which characters negotiate loss. In Ao's story "The Last Song," a woman exiled from her homeland weeps not for material possessions but for the taste of her mother's cooking (Ao, *These Hills* 106). Her longing is less about food and more about rootedness—a desire to reconnect with an identity fractured by modern displacements.

This paper, therefore, undertakes a close reading of literary texts from the Northeast to explore how food operates as a cultural marker within a postcolonial paradigm. The method is both analytical and interpretative, combining textual analysis with theoretical insights from postcolonial and cultural studies. By focusing on the works of Ao, Kire, and Dai, the study foregrounds indigenous voices that have been historically silenced and marginalised. It seeks to demonstrate that food in literature is not a mere aesthetic embellishment but a critical site for negotiating identity, memory, resistance, and autonomy.

In conclusion, the literary deployment of food in Northeast Indian writing is an act of cultural reclamation. It restores dignity to practices once ridiculed by colonial ethnographers, asserts the validity of oral and embodied knowledge, and offers a vocabulary of resistance that is rooted in the everyday. As such, food emerges not only as a theme but as a methodology—a way of reading and understanding indigenous worlds on their own terms.

Cultural Memory and Identity through Food

For the indigenous communities of Northeast India, food is not merely a tool for sustenance; it is an embodiment of cultural memory, spiritual expression, and social identity. Within the myriad tribal groups—Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Adis, Apatanis, and others—culinary traditions perform a critical role in encoding kinship structures, gender dynamics, cosmological worldviews, and seasonal rituals. These gastronomic traditions, formed over centuries of ecological adaptation, are much more than daily habits—they constitute a living cultural archive that informs community identity and historical consciousness.

Temsula Ao, in her celebrated short story collection *These Hills Called Home*, highlights how food practices such as brewing zutho (rice beer) are integral to the Naga way of life. These are not tasks performed in isolation but communal rituals in which generational

wisdom is shared. Ao describes how women gather to brew, narrating folktales and recalling ancestral taboos as the brew simmers, creating a space where moral learning and cultural bonding are natural outcomes of culinary engagement (Ao 92). The act becomes an intergenerational transmission of knowledge, where the process is valued as much as the product.

Communal feasts, especially during festivals like Moatsu among the Ao Nagas or Chapchar Kut among the Mizos, serve as expressions of gratitude, fertility, and social unity. The sharing of food during such events, often cooked in bamboo tubes or over open fires, is accompanied by song, dance, and oral storytelling. These festivals encode the cyclical nature of agricultural life, expressing reverence for the land and spirits through the preparation and communal consumption of specific foods. As Kire writes, "Our food tells the story of who we are, not just where we come from" (*Bitter Wormwood* 117).

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire crafts characters who are intimately tied to their food culture. Smoked pork, fermented bamboo shoots, sticky rice, axone (fermented soybean), and seasonal greens are not only staples of the kitchen but anchors of identity. The protagonist, growing up amidst political insurgency, often reminisces about food as a stabilising presence in a rapidly destabilising world. He reflects, "When we eat the food our grandmothers made, we remember who we are" (Kire 123). This longing is deeply tied to the idea of home—not just as a place but as a sensorial, edible memory.

Food is also gendered in these literary representations. Women, often the primary agents of culinary labour, are shown to wield a unique cultural power. In Ao's poem "Stone-People from Lungterok," the speaker invokes the mother's cooking as a mnemonic space. Each act—fermenting rice, smoking meat, cutting herbs—is laden with ancestral memory and sacred intention (Ao, *Laburnum* 58). The kitchen, thus, becomes a site of spiritual education and emotional healing. These feminine culinary practices are acts of resistance against erasure, keeping alive not only recipes but also the metaphysical relationships between humans, nature, and the divine.

Moreover, food in these narratives is often deeply embedded in the land. The gathering of wild herbs, the respectful hunting of game, and the seasonal rhythms of planting and harvesting reflect a relational worldview. Among the Apatani, for instance, rituals of food offering are performed before harvesting millet and paddy, symbolising gratitude and balance with the natural world (Mipun 211). Dai's writings reflect a similar ecological sensitivity. In *The Legends of Pensam*, characters converse about herbs as having their own "moods and silences," suggesting an animistic respect for plant life that goes far beyond utilitarian consumption (Dai 94).

The role of food in shaping memory becomes particularly poignant when communities face trauma, migration, or displacement. In Kire's *Mari*, set during World War II, the protagonist clings to culinary memories even as bombs fall around her. The taste of pork stew or the smell of dry fish becomes a symbolic act of holding onto identity amidst loss and transformation (Kire, *Mari* 89). In such contexts, food is not passive; it is a site of emotional resilience and cultural anchorage.

Urbanisation and migration have further complicated the relationship between indigenous communities and their food. Many younger people, living in cities or attending missionary schools, grow distant from traditional food practices. In literary narratives, this distance is often depicted as cultural amnesia. The characters struggle with fragmented identities, yearning for flavours that modern life has pushed to the periphery. Ao's story "The Last Song" captures this nostalgia with acute emotional clarity—the protagonist mourns not just a childhood left behind but a diet that once defined her place in the world (Ao 106).

Thus, in indigenous literature from Northeast India, food functions as a powerful conduit of memory, identity, and resistance. It is through food that authors map ancestral

histories, negotiate trauma, and affirm the vibrancy of tribal worldviews. The kitchen is not only a domestic space—it is a narrative space, a place where stories are simmered, stirred, and served.

Colonial Encounters and Culinary Disruptions

The arrival of colonialism in Northeast India heralded not only political domination but also an epistemic rupture in indigenous lifeways. Among the most profound disruptions was the alteration of traditional food systems and the redefinition of indigenous dietary practices under the rhetoric of civilisation. Colonial agents—administrators, missionaries, traders—did not simply observe local food customs; they judged them, regulated them, and, in many cases, forcibly replaced them.

British missionaries often condemned the consumption of certain meats (notably dog or pork), the brewing of rice beer, and the ritual feasting that accompanied agricultural or animistic ceremonies. These acts were rebranded as sinful or uncivilised, and converts were expected to abandon them (Misra 143). This was not merely about food—it was about cultural control. The imposition of dietary taboos by religious authorities became a means to restructure identity. As such, culinary conversion was a crucial aspect of religious conversion.

In Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, the reader witnesses the colonial project of economic transformation through the introduction of tea plantations. These monocultures not only displaced biodiverse forests but also altered the food practices of the indigenous communities. Where once wild yams, bamboo shoots, tubers, and medicinal herbs were staples of the diet, plantation labourers became dependent on rationed rice and imported goods (Dai 133). This shift illustrates what anthropologist Sidney Mintz refers to as the "colonisation of taste"—the reprogramming of desire through imposed economic systems.

Moreover, colonial taxation policies contributed to the decline of subsistence agriculture. Traditional cashless barter systems were undermined, and tribes were pushed to grow cash crops such as cotton or mustard for external markets. Ritual foods lost their sacred status when their ingredients—salt, spices, even cooking vessels—became commercial commodities (Barpujari 205). Food was thus removed from its cosmological matrix and placed into the logic of capital.

In literature, these culinary disruptions are mirrored in characters who experience profound alienation. In Ao's "The Last Song," the protagonist, having migrated to the city, mourns her inability to cook traditional food. Smoked beef and sticky rice are no longer available or socially acceptable in her new environment, and with their absence comes a loss of emotional and cultural orientation (Ao 106). The story critiques the modern assumption that cultural evolution is linear and progressive. Instead, it shows that disconnection from food leads to disconnection from self.

The spread of Christian mission schools exacerbated this process. Children were educated in Western etiquette, often being taught to eat with cutlery and eschew their tribal diets. This seemingly benign instruction was, in fact, a tool of cultural erasure. Many indigenous authors recall the shame associated with bringing traditional food to school or speaking their native language at the lunch table. The act of eating thus became politicised—what one ate, how one ate, and with whom one ate were markers of assimilation or resistance.

Even in postcolonial times, the legacy of these disruptions persists. The younger generation in many towns now prefer instant noodles, soft drinks, and industrial snacks to traditional meals. Food packaging, advertisements, and the global marketplace continue to marginalise indigenous food knowledge. Yet, in the pages of Kire, Ao, and Dai, this marginalisation is interrogated and challenged.

Indigenous literature reclaims the culinary as cultural resistance. Detailed descriptions of the preparation of fermented soybeans, boiled yam, dry-fried beef, or jungle herbs are not mere aesthetic flourishes. They are deliberate acts of epistemic affirmation. They remind

readers that this knowledge is valuable, ethical, and spiritually grounded. These literary texts engage in what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o might call "decolonising the palate"—retraining readers to appreciate, respect, and reclaim the tastes of their own traditions.

In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist's subsistence on wild food is not framed as primitive but as ethical and spiritually enlightened (Kire 45). The forest provides, but only if one respects its rhythms. Food in this context is part of a sacred ecology—a belief that stands in stark contrast to colonial logics of extraction and domination.

Thus, colonial and missionary encounters violently restructured the foodways of Northeast Indian tribes, often stripping them of their cultural moorings. Yet, through the power of literature, these culinary memories endure and reclaim space. In reaffirming food as a site of resistance, remembrance, and reconstruction, authors such as Ao, Kire, and Dai ensure that the legacies of the colonial table are challenged, and that indigenous voices continue to nourish the cultural landscape.

Literary Representations of Food in Northeast Indian Literature

In the rich tapestry of Northeast Indian literature, food is not merely described for its sensorial appeal but deployed as a multi-dimensional symbol. It functions as a medium through which writers critique colonial narratives, commemorate ancestral wisdom, and resist epistemic marginalisation. The intersection of food, memory, and resistance forms a crucial part of the literary strategies used by authors such as Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, and Mamang Dai.

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire presents a protagonist who lives alone in the forest, depending on nature for sustenance. His relationship with wild forest food—ferns, river fish, wild honey—is not framed as scarcity but as spiritual discipline. This act of eating becomes one of remembering, of honouring ecological reciprocity and ancestral knowledge. The forest is not an adversary to be conquered but a living archive to be respectfully engaged. "When I take only what I need," the protagonist reflects, "the forest rewards me" (Kire 45). This ethos subverts the modern capitalist view of food as a product and reclaims it as a relational, spiritual practice.

Food imagery in Temsula Ao's poetry deepens this engagement with memory and metaphysics. In poems such as "Prayer" and "An Old Seer's Prophecy" from *Laburnum for My Head*, Ao integrates food with ritual, prophecy, and the divine. The smell of smoked beef or the gentle boiling of yam carries sacred undertones. They are symbols of patience, rootedness, and care. Food in these poems becomes a temporal bridge between the human and the divine, the mundane and the mystical. The fermented rice in "Prayer" is more than a beverage; it is an offering to ancestors and a testament to continuity amidst decay (Ao, *Laburnum* 77).

Mamang Dai, in her acclaimed prose work *The Legends of Pensam*, intertwines food practices with oral storytelling. Recipes are passed down not in written form but through tales told beside hearths and under trees. In one memorable scene, an old woman tells a child, "Each herb has its mood, and one must respect its silence" (Dai 94). This moment encapsulates a worldview in which plants and food items are not inert ingredients but entities with agency and emotion. Such representations elevate culinary knowledge to the status of cosmological philosophy, challenging Eurocentric hierarchies of science and knowledge.

Dai's prose also captures the seasonal logic of indigenous food. Food is aligned with time—ritual time, lunar cycles, and ecological rhythms. The harvesting of wild roots, the drying of meat, or the fermentation of herbs are processes that mark transitions in communal and individual life. The texts encode what Linda Tuhiwai Smith might call "indigenous methodologies" (Smith 42)—knowledge systems embedded in experience, locality, and spirituality.

These literary representations of food challenge the colonial gaze that rendered indigenous culinary practices as primitive or unsanitary. Colonial ethnographies often reduced

indigenous food to exotic spectacle or nutritional deficiency. Yet in these works, food is re-inscribed as an aesthetic and ethical form. Kire's forest meals are poetic acts. Ao's rice beer is a sacrament. Dai's herbal broths are cosmological dialogues. Thus, the literature of Northeast India constructs what can be termed a "literary foodscape"—a narrative terrain where food embodies history, resistance, and imagination.

Language itself becomes a culinary tool. The act of naming traditional ingredients—axone, zutho, galho, dry fermented yam—within English narratives is a subversive strategy. It defies the homogenising thrust of linguistic colonialism. These untranslated words, when used unapologetically, assert cultural specificity. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o contends, language is the carrier of culture (Ngũgĩ 13), and when food names are preserved in indigenous forms, they resist erasure and standardisation.

Additionally, food in Northeast Indian literature frequently intersects with landscape. The act of cooking or gathering food is intricately tied to rivers, hills, forests, and ancestral homelands. The terrain is not a passive backdrop but a vital protagonist. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist's movements through forested trails are punctuated by foraging, cooking, and prayer, suggesting a kind of ecological storytelling in which food mediates between human and non-human worlds (Kire 47).

These literary constructions also reflect a politics of care. Unlike Western culinary literature that often glamorises food, Northeast Indian writers portray food as relational and communal. The preparation of meals is rarely solitary. Women cook for the elderly, children help pluck herbs, and food is shared, never hoarded. In Ao's "A Respectable Woman," the widow's meticulous use of traditional vessels and forest ingredients is not romanticised but quietly radical—an assertion of cultural dignity in the face of modern derision (Ao 65).

Postcolonial Resistance and Culinary Reclamation

The revival of indigenous culinary traditions in contemporary literature is not a nostalgic indulgence; it is a deliberate act of postcolonial resistance. Food, in these narratives, becomes a terrain on which battles for cultural sovereignty are fought. By reclaiming food practices that were historically stigmatised, indigenous writers assert the legitimacy of their epistemologies and contest narratives of cultural inferiority.

In *A Respectable Woman*, Temsula Ao introduces a character who embodies this resistance. An elderly widow continues to prepare meals in bamboo tubes, refusing to adopt modern utensils or ingredients. She insists on wild leaves, smoked salt, and traditional firewood cooking. Her resistance is quiet but profound. In a society that mocks her ways as outdated, she reclaims culinary space as a site of ancestral continuity and ecological wisdom (Ao 65). This character becomes an icon of what Leela Gandhi terms "affective resistance"—a non-violent, everyday disruption of hegemonic norms (Gandhi 143).

Easterine Kire's *Mari*, set during World War II, also uses food as a symbol of survival and cultural affirmation. In one scene, as bombs fall around Kohima, a mother insists on preparing pork stew, not out of routine but as a deliberate act of defiance. "Even if the world ends," she says, "our child must remember the taste of our home" (Kire, *Mari* 89). In this moment, food becomes an act of maternal love, cultural transmission, and existential assertion. It is both comfort and armour.

These literary moments resonate with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a hybrid cultural space where new meanings and identities emerge from the negotiation of difference. Food, in these texts, occupies that third space. It is neither wholly traditional nor fully modern, neither entirely indigenous nor completely global. A dish may use a modern stove but follow ancient recipes. Bamboo shoots may be sold in plastic packaging but retain their ritual value. This hybridity resists binary logic and enables what Bhabha calls "strategic essentialism"—using cultural markers tactically to affirm identity while resisting rigid essentialism (Bhabha 113).

The culinary act, then, becomes performative. It narrates history, reclaims territory, and enacts solidarity. The boiling of rice, the grinding of spices, or the wrapping of food in banana leaves becomes part of a larger choreography of cultural endurance. In Spivak's terms, the subaltern may not be allowed to speak in elite academic discourse, but she speaks through her kitchen. Her voice is in the hiss of mustard seeds, the texture of dry fish, the bitter taste of gourd (Spivak 104).

Moreover, the postcolonial culinary imagination is not limited to memory. It is futurist. Writers envision a future where indigenous foodways are preserved, documented, and innovated upon without losing their soul. Mamang Dai, in interviews, has spoken of the need to record oral food histories before they vanish. This call is echoed in her fiction, where the passing down of herbal knowledge is portrayed as urgent and sacred.

This literary culinary reclamation aligns with broader global movements such as Indigenous Food Sovereignty and Slow Food. These movements advocate for the right of communities to control their food systems, seeds, and land. In the Northeast Indian context, where shifting cultivation (jhum) is increasingly criminalised, and traditional food practices are being replaced by homogenised market goods, such literary interventions are politically potent.

Even language use in culinary contexts becomes a site of resistance. Writers who preserve indigenous food terminology in their English texts assert linguistic pluralism. These words—zutho, axone, galho—are not italicised or explained; they are simply placed within the text, asking the reader to meet them on their own terms. This linguistic strategy disrupts the imperial standardisation of language and knowledge.

Finally, postcolonial culinary literature from Northeast India foregrounds ethics. It questions industrial agriculture, environmental degradation, and food insecurity. Through characters who forage sustainably, grow their own herbs, or fast ritually, the literature proposes an alternate food ethic rooted in respect, balance, and care. This vision is not utopian; it is deeply political and pedagogical.

In conclusion, the literary representation of food in the writings of Kire, Ao, and Dai constitutes a profound act of resistance and reclamation. These narratives challenge colonial depictions of tribal food as primitive, assert the ethical and aesthetic value of indigenous foodways, and imagine futures rooted in cultural autonomy. Food, in this postcolonial framework, is not only what nourishes the body but also what sustains the soul of a people. It is literature's offering to a world hungry for memory, dignity, and decolonial hope.

Conclusion

In the indigenous literature of Northeast India, food is not treated as a mere background element or a cultural flourish—it is foregrounded as a living, breathing expression of identity, resistance, and memory. Throughout this paper, we have seen how food serves multiple literary and symbolic functions: it acts as a repository of oral traditions, an instrument of ecological and spiritual connectivity, and a powerful counter-narrative to colonial modernity and epistemic violence. The culinary dimensions in the works of writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mamang Dai not only preserve fading traditions but also animate the discourse of cultural reclamation.

As we reflect on the critical roles food plays in indigenous writing, it becomes evident that these narratives are intentionally political. Food is not romanticised as quaint or nostalgic; rather, it is inscribed with urgency and meaning. In Temsula Ao's stories and poems, food is often the last remaining trace of a vanishing culture. Through the symbolic feasts and food rituals depicted in *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, Ao renders visible the deep philosophical and social functions of traditional food practices. Her characters often cook, ferment, serve, and share meals in defiance of modern derision or socio-political erasure. These culinary acts are not trivial—they are what bell hooks would term "sites of resistance,"

particularly for marginalised women who use the domestic space as a battleground for cultural survival.

Easterine Kire, too, uses food as a narrative technique to evoke place, memory, and trauma. In *Bitter Wormwood* and *When the River Sleeps*, food emerges as the axis around which family, home, and community revolve. In times of war, insurgency, or exile, the scent of smoked meat, the ritual of eating sticky rice, or the taste of bamboo shoot curry offer characters a moment of grounding—however fleeting—in the chaos of dislocation. These texts remind us that food is not merely sustenance; it is the very texture of belonging. More profoundly, Kire's treatment of food resists dominant nationalist or developmental narratives that treat the tribal body as archaic or disposable. Instead, she imbues these bodies with dignity and history through the ritual of eating.

Mamang Dai's literary oeuvre adds a metaphysical dimension to this discussion. Her portrayal of food, especially herbs, wild vegetables, and seasonal fruits, often borders on the spiritual. In *The Legends of Pensam* and *The Black Hill*, food is not just consumed—it is worshipped, mourned, and negotiated. Dai draws from oral traditions, where food is imbued with stories, taboos, and teachings, each plant carrying memory, each preparation echoing ritual. Her writing refuses the Cartesian split between the spiritual and the material, proposing instead a continuum in which the act of eating is a communion with the environment and ancestral spirits. Her insistence on this worldview destabilises colonial constructions of indigenous cultures as pre-logical or animistic, repositioning them instead as sophisticated ecological philosophies.

The cumulative impact of these literary portrayals is profound. By centring food in their narratives, Ao, Kire, and Dai are not simply recording culinary habits—they are rewriting history. The histories of the Northeast, often marginalised or distorted in national and colonial archives, are being rewritten through the language of taste, smell, and memory. These are histories not captured by census or policy but held in the making of rice beer, in the drying of fermented soybeans, or in the gathering of forest tubers. As Michel de Certeau argues, everyday practices like cooking are not devoid of power; they are forms of tactical resistance. These writers turn food into narrative form, transforming taste into testimony.

Moreover, the emphasis on food in Northeast Indian literature challenges the academic tendency to treat indigenous texts as folkloric or ethnographic. While the cultural specificity of food practices does draw from lived tradition, their literary presentation is anything but static. These authors are not merely documenting; they are transforming. The smell of bamboo shoot is not just a detail—it is metaphor. The sharing of pork stew in a time of war is not just an act of love—it is a gesture of defiance. This is why it is important for critics, scholars, and readers to move beyond exoticisation or cultural tokenism when engaging with such works. The culinary in these texts is not quaint—it is radical.

Another critical insight that emerges from this exploration is the gendered nature of culinary knowledge. Women in these texts often appear as the last bastions of tradition, holding on to recipes, rituals, and methods even as the world changes around them. Whether it is the old widow in Ao's "A Respectable Woman" who refuses to use modern utensils, or the mother in *Mari* who insists on preparing a traditional meal amidst aerial bombardments, these women reclaim their agency through food. They use the kitchen as a space of negotiation, healing, and rebellion. Their acts, while domestic, are not private—they are political.

Furthermore, this literary reclamation of food is not only about looking back—it is also about imagining the future. In foregrounding indigenous foodways, these authors offer alternative frameworks of sustainability, ecology, and ethics. Their works propose a model of living where food is not industrialised, not detached from labour or land, and not reduced to calorific value. They present a world where food is sacred, relational, and rhythmic. In a time

when the planet faces ecological collapse and food insecurity, these indigenous visions are not peripheral—they are imperative.

The resistance encoded in food narratives also resonates globally. From Native American food sovereignty movements to African diasporic culinary reclamations, the reassertion of indigenous foodways is part of a broader decolonial awakening. The literature of Northeast India participates in this transnational conversation. It asserts that the politics of eating is inseparable from the politics of knowing, of remembering, and of being. To eat is to choose—to align oneself with either forgetting or remembering, erasure or resurgence.

In this light, the act of writing about food is itself an act of resistance. Authors from the Northeast, by writing about what their communities eat, how they eat, and why they eat as they do, are asserting that their stories matter. That their ways of life, long misunderstood or dismissed by dominant discourses, are worthy of attention, respect, and preservation. They are not writing cookbooks. They are writing counter-histories. They are decolonising not only the body but the very palate of the nation.

In summation, food in indigenous Northeast Indian literature is a lens through which we understand far more than cuisine—it reveals the textures of survival, the weight of memory, and the stubborn glow of identity. It encodes stories of trauma and resilience, of oppression and refusal, of exile and return. Through literary representations of food, authors like Ao, Kire, and Dai offer not just meals but manifestos. They feed their readers with truth, with courage, and with hope. In doing so, they remind us that while revolutions may be fought in streets and legislatures, they are also fought in kitchens, over hearths, and at the humble dining table. Here, food is not only life—it is literature.

Works Cited

1) Ao, Temsula. *Laburnum for My Head*. Penguin, 2009.
——. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Zubaan, 2006.
2) Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3) Dai, Mamang. *The Black Hill*. Speaking Tiger, 2014.
——. *The Legends of Pensam*. Penguin, 2006.
4) Kire, Easterine. *Bitter Wormwood*. Zubaan, 2011.
——. *Mari*. Zubaan, 2010.
——. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.
5) Misra, Tilottama. *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagaland*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2010.
6) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Columbia University Press, 1988.