

Towards a Tribal Literary Criticism in India: Engaging Northeast Tribal Voices in English Literature

M. MAISUANGDIBOU *

English and Cultural Studies

Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

maisuangdibou.m@res.christuniversity.in

ABILASH CHANDRAN R.

English and Cultural Studies

Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

ABSTRACT

This article formulates and applies a tribal literary criticism to the tribal voices of Northeast India articulated in English literature. It moves beyond prevailing literary paradigms that have traditionally marginalised indigenous worldviews and viewpoints by adopting indigenous-tribal epistemologies and a decolonial approach. By applying tribal knowledge through close readings of selected tribal literary texts produced by tribal writers from the Northeastern regions of India, the study explores key concepts such as community, land, identity, and ecology, rooted in the tribal holistic worldview of the God-world-human continuum. Relying on tribal worldviews, oral traditions, memories, storytelling, and lived experiences, indigenous-tribal interpretative tools offer alternative frameworks. Furthermore, the study validates tribal ways of knowing and expands the field of literary criticism by including diverse epistemic traditions.

Keywords: tribal literary criticism; tribal–indigenous literature from Northeast India; Indigenous epistemologies; decolonial reading; God-world-human continuum

INTRODUCTION

Tribal-Indigenous¹ groups have long had distinctive means to reading, analysing, and comprehending literature; these approaches are firmly anchored in their collective worldviews, orality, spirituality, and land-based ethics. However, these rich literary viewpoints have frequently been marginalised and unrecognised by prevailing academic frameworks. To address this, the present article seeks to reimagine a tribal-indigenous literary approach, engaging with the voices of Northeast India's tribes as articulated in English-language literature. As S. Fitzgerald (2007) observes, Indigenous literary culture “posits the existence of a vibrant field that must be critiqued and examined as part of its growth process” (p. 173). Here, tribal literary criticism refers to the interpretation and evaluation of literary and cultural texts through the lens of tribal perspectives,

¹ The International Labour Organisation (2016) defines "indigenous" and "tribal" as "Indigenous and tribal peoples," which is a common denominator for more than 370 million people found in more than 70 countries worldwide. Indigenous and tribal peoples have their own cultures, languages, customs, and institutions, which distinguish them from other parts of the societies in which they find themselves." "Indigenous and tribal peoples are often known by national terms such as native peoples, aboriginal peoples, first nations, adivasi, janajati, hunter-gatherers, or hill tribes. Given the diversity of people it aims to protect, the Convention uses the inclusive terminology of "indigenous and tribal peoples" and ascribes the same set of rights to both groups. In Latin America, for example, the term "tribal" has been applied to certain afro-descendent communities ("Who are the indigenous and tribal peoples?"). In this paper, the terms "tribal" or "tribe," "indigenous," "tribal-indigenous," "indigenous-tribal," and "native" are used. They signify the same meaning.

seeking decolonisation, reclaiming and revaluing tribal values, and highlighting the communal, land-centred, environmentally concerned, and spiritually integrated forms of knowing that underpin tribal literary output.

Tribal literary criticism has broader relevance to global Indigenous discourses. The selected texts include Easterine Kire's novel *Sky is My Father* (2018) (hereafter *SMF*), Tamsila Ao's (hereafter T. Ao) poem "Stone-People from Lungterok" (hereafter *SPFL*), and Mamang Dai's poem "Hello, Mountain" (hereafter *HM*). *SMF* is recognised as the first novel in English by a Naga writer. T. Ao's poem is drawn from her volume *Book of Songs* (2013), while Dai's poem appears in *The White Shirts of Summer* (2023). For analysing the aforementioned texts, the researchers employ indigenous-tribal epistemologies and decolonial readings.

By aligning with tribal-Indigenous worldviews centred on land, community, lived realities, and self-representation, this study contributes to ongoing conversations around tribal literary criticism. While important dimensions such as aesthetics, hermeneutics, tribal feminism, and reorientation are acknowledged, they fall beyond the immediate scope of this inquiry and merit dedicated scholarly exploration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tribal literary activity in India has expanded significantly in recent decades by producing a substantial body of documented and creative works. Nevertheless, systematic frameworks for tribal literary criticism remain underdeveloped. This absence does not indicate that such elements are missing in the tribal or native world, but they have yet to be comprehensively theorised and organised. G. S. Meena (2017) further notes that tribal literary discourse—still "in the making"—has only begun to address fundamental questions such as "Who are Tribals?" and to engage with issues of history, culture, language, and identity (p. 81). Given that tribal culture and literature are dynamic, D. Garneau (2015) stresses the need for critical approaches that are equally adaptive.

In recent times, tribal scholars have employed a wide range of critical frameworks, including postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and feminist reading, among others (e.g., Dai, 2014; Kire, 2018). While these dominant models have enriched analysis, they often fail to fully engage with the cultural specificity, epistemologies, and imaginative landscapes of tribal communities. Thus, underscoring the need for frameworks grounded in indigenous worldviews and lived realities.

Globally, comparable efforts have been made to indigenise literary theory. In addition to tribal-indigenous storytellers and critics well-versed in tribal knowledge, scholars like Robert Warrior (1995), Craig Womack (2008), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), and K. Thanzauva (2022) support methodologies based on indigenous knowledge systems. Tribal literary critique is a product of communitarian worldviews, lived experiences, collective memories, and land-centred aesthetics. Remarkably, Womack (2008) affirms that theory can originate not only in formal scholarship but also in "novels, poems, plays... and life itself" (p. 7). In tribal life, land is of paramount significance, as it provides sustenance, informs spiritual and cultural insights, and serves as the foundation for storytelling traditions. This is evident in works such as Kire's *SMF* (2018) and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), portraying the mystical landscapes of the lands of the Nagas as the intersection point of the divine, natural, and human realms; T. Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006), *Book of Songs* (2013), *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2017), which unite orality, spirituality, and land; and Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) and *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), which intertwine Arunachal's terrains with cultural riches and community memory. Similarly, A. W.

Longchar's *Return to Mother Earth* (2012) describes indigenous spirituality as “cosmic-centric” (p. 19).

This worldview is non-dualistic, rejecting binaries between the sacred and secular, as well as between nature and culture (Thanzauva, 2022; Vashum, 2017). The Liangmai-Naga word *Ting-kadi-maina*, which consists of *ting* (God), *kadi* (world/cosmos), and *maina* (humankind), reflects the interconnection of all things—divine, natural world, and human (Maisuangdibou, 2022). Tribal societies, according to Devy (2002), affirm the “intimately linked” of all realities, as well as the role humanity plays in maintaining relationships. Furthermore, Thanzauva (2022) argues that understanding and maintaining this connection is crucial to envisioning and pursuing a just social order in Indian culture.

On the other hand, this tribal worldview is currently struggling to endure in the face of modernisation and globalisation, which leads to marginalisation and estrangement. Tribes face land loss, sociocultural dislocation, political powerlessness, erosion of their identity and culture, and voicelessness (Khanday, 2019; Maisuangdibou, 2022). Similarly, H. S. Shekhar (2015) in his novel *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* depicts the struggle and resilience of the Adivasi/tribal community in Jharkhand, India. These factors, cited throughout this study, form both the historical context and the critical lens for interpreting tribal literature. Meyer (2001, p. 27) points out that in integrated traditional cultures, such as in indigenous communities, artistic values are ingrained in “a dynamic cultural network,” which includes social interactions, ecology, oral tradition, and tribal-indigenous cosmological beliefs. Thus, the point of departure of tribal–indigenous criticism is in addressing the organic whole in its literature, where land, nature, human, and the supernatural are inseparably linked.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this research, the author adopts tribal-indigenous epistemologies and decolonial studies, enabling a culturally rooted yet critically engaged reading of tribal literature in English. Central to tribal-indigenous epistemologies, as scholars like Vine Deloria Jr. (1981, 1992), Smith (1999), and Thanzauva (2022) emphasise the affirmation of a distinct tribal worldview—centred on the God-world-human continuum, communal living, land-based consciousness, and oral culture—where knowledge is embodied, lived, and interconnected with land, ecosystem, and spirituality. Through this lens, tribal literature is approached as a living cultural product.

Decolonial studies provide critical tools to examine how colonial and dominant epistemologies have marginalised tribal knowledge. The writings of Smith (1999), Longchar (2012), and Dai (2006), among others, challenge the hierarchical structures of literary discourse that ignore tribal voices. This article facilitates resistance to colonial and mainstream literary frameworks, affirming a space for tribal voices within the literary world. By integrating these theoretical approaches, the researchers formulate a tribal literary criticism, for example, land-centred reading, that is grounded in tribal knowledge systems and lived experiences. Thus, it offers a contextually relevant theoretical framework for reading tribal literature.

METHODOLOGY

The article employs a tribal literary reading as its methodological approach. It integrates qualitative literary analysis grounded in tribal epistemologies and decolonial reading. This study aims to develop a tribal literary criticism grounded in tribal resources and to conduct close textual readings of selected works by tribal authors from Northeast India. The frameworks are informed by tribal understandings of the interconnectedness of God, nature, and humanity, as well as their present state of alienation. This study integrates close reading of select texts. In doing so, it develops a literary criticism grounded in tribal knowledge, while contributing to alternative modes of literary engagement beyond dominant paradigms.

TRIBAL WORLDVIEW, LAND, AND ALIENATION

Tribal-indigenous communities have an earth-centric, land-based, eco-friendly worldview that encompasses all of reality: God, the world, and humanity. It prioritises a holistic communitarian viewpoint over personal preferences; therefore, tribal outlook is not anthropocentric, but cosmic-centred (Thanauva, 2022). The intricate interconnectivity of reality forms the basis of the tribal worldview and has a great impact on its literary representations. Tribal belief has no clear distinction between the sacred and the secular, life and death, and body and soul, as everything is considered interconnected (Maisuangdibou, 2022). Tribal communities' daily tasks, such as farming, jhum cultivation, food gathering, hunting, and felling trees, are performed collectively, and they have spiritual significance. Therefore, rituals are often connected to these events, where cutting a large tree is done with rite and ritual. This enduring communitarian model, manifest in collective land ownership, collective farming, festivals, and social events, forms the foundational lens for tribal literature and criticism.

Indigenous folk literature resists thematic compartmentalisation. Rather, cosmogony, didacticism, romance, and tragedy often intertwine. “Art for art’s sake” is available but uncommon, as stories often convey multiple dimensions, such as moral, ethical, spiritual and historical. While several narratives are crafted as comedies or romances, they also serve to entertain and are didactic by embedding a communitarian outlook (Maisuangdibou, 2022, p. 268). As interpretation takes place within a framework of cosmic collective relationality, where meaning is co-constructed through shared experience, tribal-indigenous readings are therefore inextricably linked to the community that creates and preserves them. Storytelling, reading, and listening are collective acts embedded in communal participation (Marak, 2021), positioning tribal literary criticism as a community-rooted interpretive practice.

Land is central to tribal literature and worldview (Longchar, 2012). Literary landscapes, such as mountains and forests, are the foundations of tribal literature. In tribal cosmologies, there is no sharp divide between nature and culture, or the spiritual and physical realms; all beings—God, land, and human—coexist in a relational manner. This interconnectedness, grounded in place, demands a land-based literary criticism honouring the earth as a primary referent of meaning and community. A distinctive feature of the tribal worldview is the level of ordering in which humans emerge only after the divine and the land.

Within indigenous-tribal literary culture, storytelling, memory, and performance serve as essential knowledge systems. Through oral traditions and retelling, they safeguard the collective wisdom beyond simple narrative methods. However, the art of storytelling is waning in tribal

communities. As Walter Benjamin (2019, pp. 51–52) succinctly notes in the broader sense, “The art of storytelling is coming to an end because the epic side of truth, that is, wisdom, is dying out... it is, rather, a side effect of historical secular forces of productivity that have gradually eliminated the storyteller from the realm of living speech.” Despite the decline of storytelling, it remains the most popular art form in the tribal-indigenous world. Various oral stories are being passed down through storytelling, performance, collective memory, and communal transmission. One of the essential characteristics of tribal criticism is the community's storytelling, reading and understanding. Through this collective participation, erasure of orality is resisted, and it persists as a dynamic, liberative, aesthetical, hermeneutical and communal practice (T. Ao, 2013).

Tribal literature engages with the diverse issues faced by tribal-indigenous communities, such as cultural degradation, identity crisis, decolonisation, and psychological fear and trauma in the face of continuous marginalisation and estrangement, which Smith (1999, p. 2) calls “counter stories.” It aligns with other counter-hegemonic literatures—such as feminist/womanist, Black, Dalit, and Indigenous literatures. Tribal voices highlight the intersectionality in these discourses, where multiple struggles interweave through dialogue and liberative reading. Meena (2017) identifies tribal literature as a search for identity, a form of resistance, and a critique of exploitation and cultural threats (p. 81). Tribal criticism, which is based on lived experience and the desire for cultural and communal survival, thus arises from the periphery to experience liberation. Additionally, racism, casteism, sexism, alienation, and other socio-economic issues that influence tribal realities are addressed in tribal writing and criticism on a local and global level (Smith, 1999). This approach resonates with decolonial thinking, ecological justice, gendering, and democratisation because it is contextual and indigenous by nature (Smith, 1999). Indian tribal criticism acknowledges and solidifies its position in the current critical discourse by generating a substantial agency for interaction and dialogue across various literary and theoretical frameworks.

TEXTUAL GROUNDING: TRIBAL VOICES IN ENGLISH

The three texts examined here are selected because they represent diverse tribal voices from various tribes in Northeast India. These literary works articulate multifaceted relationships with life, land, ecosystem, culture, resistance and liberation across genres. Kire's *SMF* (2018), first published as *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), is a notable work in tribal literature in India. Her literary debut was the poetry collection *Kelhoukevira* (1982). Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* received *The Hindu Lit for Life Prize* in 2015 (*The Hindu*, 2016). *SMF* is structured in two parts: the first reconstructs the historical resistance of the Angami Naga village of Khonoma against British incursions between 1832 and 1880, while the second offers a fictionalised narrative of this struggle. Interweaving history, folklore, and political resistance, the novel presents a textured portrayal of Naga culture and identity under British colonial rule.

T. Ao, a poet and short story writer from the Ao-Naga community of Nagaland, received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013 for her short story collection *Laburnum for My Head*. Her poem *SPFL* reimagines the Ao-Naga creation myth, centred on Lungterok—the sacred origin site of the Ao people—the poem initiates T. Ao's sustained engagement with her community's myths. This work reflects a critical effort to recover and reconstruct indigenous epistemologies through poetic expression.

Dai, from the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, India, received one of India's highest literary awards, the Sahitya Akademi Award, in 2017 for her novel *The Black Hill*. Dai's poetic world is about land, river, forest, and mountain, a reflection of the terrains and landscapes of her home state, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Merging oral traditions with modern literary form, Dai's *HM* reflects on ecological fragility and the interconnectedness of land, nature, and lived experience.

TRIBAL COMMUNITARIAN READING

Within the indigenous-tribal epistemology, interpretation is intrinsically connected with the community. The concept of "community" in the tribal worldview encompasses not just the human community, but the entire realities (Longchar, 2012; Maisuangdibou, 2022; Thanzauva, 2022). Therefore, tribal-indigenous meaning-making and criticism are fundamentally collective and relational. Likewise, any individual interpretation is disclosed within the community and serves to sustain its relational framework. Furthermore, the indigenous-tribal epistemology mode of literary readings is derived, conditioned and shaped by the community within which they are shared and preserved.

A vital assumption of this worldview is the inter-relational and dynamic nature of reality as an organic whole defined by the God-nature-human interrelationships. Tribal peoples seek harmony with this cosmic rhythm, live in harmony with nature, and respect all beings, envisioning humans as responsible and relational beings. Tribal literature serves as a medium through which the mystery and beauty of this cosmic community are acknowledged and reflected. This cosmic, community-centred understanding is imperative for the interpretation of tribal literature, where the total creation consciousness serves as the reference point for tribal literary criticism. Such a communitarian vision requires an all-encompassing and holistic perception of reality. Accordingly, community-centric readings must emphasise interrelationship, love, respect, justice, and compassion across all existence. This tribal relational reading foregrounds the *Ting-kadi-maina* (divine-world-human) harmony shaping their world (Maisuangdibou, 2022, p. 270). Likewise, Longchar (2012, p. 31) states, "All the indigenous communities, whether in Asia, Africa, North America or South America, perceive the whole cosmos as one integrated and interlinked experience." Hence, tribal-indigenous literature is not merely a text devoid of values but a vital source of life; it elucidates reality and reaffirms the tribal holistic vision of an all-embracing community.

Community-based criticism is fundamentally local and grounded in the lived reality of the community. Tribal criticism divorced from community and inter-relationality is neither liberative nor transformative. Therefore, tribal literary interpretation seeks to recover and uphold the cosmic interconnection of God, nature, and human, providing a space for communitarian criticism. Therefore, interpretation and criticism engage in restoring this all-embracing cosmic community that sustains tribal existence.

NARRATIVES OF COMMUNAL BELONGING: READING KIRE, AO, AND DAI

Kire's novel, *SMF*, set against the backdrop of British colonial incursions from 1832 onward in the land of the Naga tribes, reveals how colonisation and modern warfare disrupted tribal communitarian relationships, producing deep cultural ruptures. The novel asserts a tribal worldview in which the sky (spiritual cosmos), land (ancestral space), and humans are inseparably interconnected. This relational conception of community—embodied in the belief that “man and tiger and spirit were once brothers” (p. 18)—is woven into the lived experiences of the tribal community. Individual experiences are never isolated from the cosmic order but embedded within ancestral spirits, land, forest ecologies, and ritual practices. Interpretation of events like sickness, death, or dreams in the novel is negotiated through community wisdom. This is evident in the Thevo priest's chant, “We have come to solicit peace between man and spirit” (p. 14). Such narratives affirm a sacred vision of reality in which God, land, forests, and ancestral spirits are active and present with the living.

The novel also underscores the centrality of the human community—village (Khonoma), clans, community homes (*thou*), collective works, and feasts of merit—reinforces the ethics of sharing, exemplified when Keviselie provides food and shows altruism for villagers and neighbours (pp. 19–28). In fact, a glimpse of communal solidarity in death is witnessed in the story where “Neighbours, hearing their cries, had quickly congregated and they came and mourned her loudly” (p. 113), which showcases a common practice in tribal life where people, as a community, gather with the bereaved family and take care of the family in every possible way. However, Kire in the novel exposes patriarchal hegemony within this communal fabric, where women are excluded from clan deliberations, and points like “It's man-talk...” (p. 3) and “birthing was women's business” (p. 5) barred women from male spaces and others (p. 7). Characterising weak men as *Thenumia*, meaning “women!” is linked to women's roles in society as a property of her father, and later of her husband (p. 8). Despite certain freedoms enjoyed by women in tribal society compared to other societies of the world, Kire brings out how gender roles remain imbued in patriarchy. Thus, community reading in this context functions as a critical platform for amplifying the voices of women oppressed within tribal society. It operates as an act of resistance—subverting patriarchal structures and challenging all forms of gender-based discrimination.

Similarly, Tamsula Ao's *SPFL* rearticulates the Ao-Naga creation myth, in which the emergence of ancestors from six stones at Lungterok signifies a sacred genesis embedded within a cosmic order wherein land, spirit, and people exist in an indivisible unity.

Lungterok,
The six Stones
Where the progenitors
And forebears
Of the stone-people
Were Born
Out of the womb
Of the earth.

(T. Ao, 2013, p. 109)

By grounding the Ao-Naga origin in a sacred landscape, *SPFL* roots its identity in a collective ancestral birthplace, Lungterok, located in Chungliyimti, a village in Tuensang District, Nagaland, India. The myth of emerging from stone binds the community not only to a place or space but also to the spiritual memory of their ancestors, connected to the land. The ties between the spirit, world and human are expressed in the poem, where the “Stone-People” symbolise

resilience, progressiveness, sacred origin, and migration of the Ao-Naga tribe. This sacred genealogy intrinsically intertwines with the spiritual domain of the community.

The worshippers
Of unknown, unseen Spirits
Of trees and forests,
Of stones and rivers,
Believers of souls...
Into the hereafter.

(T. Ao, 2013, p. 110)

Here, *SPFL* highlights communal participation in shared spiritual practices—appeasing the spirits more than the Supreme Being, believing in souls, rebirth, and the land of the dead—which are key to social cohesion and identity in tribal contexts. This continuum is present in the way the poem invokes spiritual origins, mythic space, and communal identity as an indivisible whole. For the Ao-Nagas, the stone ancestors are not mere symbols, but active presences within the community's ongoing dialogue with land and spirit.

The unity of the divine–cosmos–human interconnectedness also finds a subtle yet profound expression in Dai's *HM*. The opening lines:

Every morning when the forest wakes
The canopy goes for a walk
Hailing the sun, counting the wind
Discussing fruit and the weather

(Dai, 2023, p. 18)

The above first stanza of the poem addresses the mountain as a living presence, personalised as a member of the shared community in the world (p. 18). Through gestures, the mountain enacts a ritual of acknowledgement, affirming the tribal belief of oneness. The canopy, sun, and wind are part of the interconnectedness, participating alongside humans and spirits in meaning-making of the future, the hope and life (“Discussing fruit and weather”). *HM* unfolds the tribal imagination, where interpretation gradually rises from the landscape, natural objects, sound, and the nurturing presence of Mother Earth (Longchar, 2012).

How are you, mountain?
Is everything alright
Is the Earth growing old?

(Dai, 2023, p. 18)

These lines, which enact a tribal greeting—“How are you, mountain?” and “Is everything alright”—have a deep connection with how respect is shown to the land. In the tribal world, respect is shown in relation to age and achievements (Maisuangdibou, 2022). Dai fuses Western and tribal forms by juxtaposing “Hello” with “Is everything alright” and “How are you,” in a relational manner. This synthesis becomes a communal value that is rooted in land and kinship. *HM* thus resonates with the belief that meaning emerges relationally, through embodied experience in a shared world.

TRIBAL ALIENATION FROM LAND AND CULTURE: A DECOLONIAL READING

Tribal communities of Northeast India continue to experience systemic discrimination and alienation under dominant communities and political and socio-cultural regimes—an experience central to tribal literature and criticism. Thanzauva (2022, p. 11) unequivocally captures this condition: “They [tribals of India] are culturally alienated, socially stigmatised, economically exploited, poor and politically powerless.” These communities continue to face identity erosion, land loss, racism, regionalism, cultural domination, and political marginalisation—both locally and in mainland India—amid ongoing neo-colonialism, militarisation, and cultural neglect (Deloria, 1981; Thanzauva, 2022).

Such realities demand critical engagement in tribal literary readings. Here, tribal literature becomes a vital space for articulating these layered experiences faced by tribals of Northeast India—violence, racial slurs such as “chinky,” “Nepali,” “momo,” and constant oppression (Pou 7). Writers such as Kire (2011, 2013, 2014, 2018) and Thanzauva (2022), among others, discuss themes of conflict, alienation, and tribal land/space and cultural rights. They also discuss state violence, displacement, institutional violence, AFSPA-induced trauma, extrajudicial killings, and sexual violence (Pou 5-6; *The Times of India*, 2025, July 10).

The persistence of British colonial administrative legacies—most visibly through the persistent enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (AFSPA) by the Government of India in tribal regions—has significantly impeded efforts toward self-governance, unity, and mental decolonisation. Rather than experiencing structural transformation, tribal societies in the Northeast remain fractured by historical divide-and-rule policies and subjected to militarised governance. The AFSPA is still active in tribal territories such as in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1958). It institutionalises state control by granting sweeping powers to security forces over civilians (*The Hindu*, 2024, March 28). In this context, tribal voices serve as a form of resistance and liberation.

In conjunction with ongoing militarisation and state control, tribal communities of Northeast India also face deep socio-cultural alienation by dominant mainland Indian society (Paliwal, 2024). Discrimination against Northeast tribal communities is multi-layered—(1) rooted in tribal identity, (2) geographic origin of being from Northeast India, (3) physical features associated with East and Southeast Asia, and (4) economic marginality. In addition, tribal women from Northeast India face intensified prejudice due to gender—for being women—compounding these existing forms of marginalisation. These intersecting markers produce a compounded experience of exclusion (Maisuangdibou, 2022, pp. 154–161). Furthermore, tribal peoples are frequently placed outside the caste hierarchy—often seen as outcastes, even below Dalits—and are subjected to pejorative labels such as “third-class citizens,” “chinky,” or “momo” in dominant social discourses (Golmei, 2017, May 23).

In recent years, cultural imperialism—often manifesting as neo-colonialism—has intensified within tribal societies globally. Tribal and indigenous communities have experienced marginalisation more than ever through various means, including cultural, political, economic, and media (Smith, 1999). Such modern neo-colonial invasions further colonise the tribal minds, languages, and knowledge systems, and cultivate fear psychosis. This ongoing mental, cultural, and academic colonisation poses a dangerous threat to the survival of tribal cultures and languages and hinders the authentic construction and reconstruction of indigenous identities, worldviews, and epistemologies.

A critical decolonial consciousness is vital to unveil colonial biases in dominant literary traditions (Wakeham, 2022). Almost all the tribal villages in the state of Manipur, India, are still identified by non-tribal names. Village names such as “Chiang,” “Piulekluang,” and “Konsaram” are officially recognised by non-local Manipuri words “Langmei,” “Tamah,” and “Konsakhul” by the Government. This reflects a systematic erasure of tribal heritage. Consequently, tribal literary texts convey a profound sense of disconnection from land and culture (Rabani & Mishra, 2023). In today’s tribal context of Northeast India, decolonisation is not only a response to Western colonisation, but also to colonisation by dominant groups. Therefore, a decolonial framework is crucial for interpreting and resisting colonial conditions and challenges to all hegemonic structures, thereby enabling the reclamation of indigenous agency and narrative autonomy (Smith, 1999; Vashum, 2017).

LAND, CULTURE, AND DECOLONIAL RESISTANCE IN KIRE, AO, AND DAI

Kire’s *SMF* (2018) narrates the devastating effects of colonial violence on Naga tribal life through memories of the Khonoma war (1832–1880) between the British and the Angami-Naga community. The novel depicts how sacred, fertile land was transformed into a militarised zone: “occupied... cut down their forests, taxed them, and forced them into labour which they hated” (p. 91). The protagonist—Levi’s recollections of exile, loss, and fear, due to British colonial administrative control—depicts how tribal people experience alienation not only physically but also spiritually from their land and culture. Kire critiques the long-term effects of colonial disruption, displaying how the tribals experience loss and trauma that reverberates across generations and disturbs their oral cultural memory till the present. This alienation persists under postcolonial governance, notably through the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, still enforced in parts of Northeast India (Ministry of Home Affairs, 1958).

By weaving oral testimonies into historical fiction, Kire engages in what may be termed decolonial remembering. Placing history in the novel’s “Introduction” (2018, pp. vii-xv). Frames the fictional narrative within a documented past, transforming elders’ oral accounts into a literary archive that resists erasure. Rather than reproducing colonial historiography—evident in records declaring “The spirit of Khonoma must be quenched” (p. 101) and “Khonoma was razed to the ground” (p. 105), “the white men had dispersed the clans of Khonoma” (p. 109)—Kire centres lived tribal memory.

Despite Khonoma being burned down four times, the community “came back and began the task of rebuilding” (pp. 108–109). The voices of women and elders, as seen in the lines “Women wept as they saw their home turned into charred ruins” and “the men only felt a deep cold anger” (p. 109), restore agency to those excluded from colonial records. By transforming the village’s exile and trauma into a story, Kire creates a healing act and a remembrance. In this sense, *SMF* participates in the broader project of decolonisation by remembering from the margins.

T. Ao’s *SPFLT* (2013) similarly reclaims suppressed tribal worldviews through poetic storytelling. The poem serves as a cultural counter-memory, reasserting an Ao-Naga indigenous cosmogony—“Lungterok... Born / Out of the womb / Of the earth” (p. 109)—that resists and contests colonial narratives that sever tribal land and mythology from tribal identity. This Ao-Naga origin from stone—or earth-as-womb imagery, very common in tribal-indigenous viewpoints, situates land as a living ancestor, part of the cosmic community, and not a resource to be manipulated:

The worshippers
Of unknown, unseen Spirits...
Believers of soul...
And passage across the water
Into the hereafter.

(T. Ao, 2013, p. 110)

These lines reaffirm primal belief systems—the spiritual practices often marginalised under colonial and modern regimes. T. Ao, by posing the tribal spirituality, “*worshippers... unseen Spirits / Believers of soul... / And passage across the water Into the hereafter*” (p. 110), interrogates the centrality of land as the source of their religion. Tribal spirituality is an earth-centred spirituality, where the Spirits are part of the continuum, and souls are believed to be in close proximity with the living. Moreover, the poet affirms that the Ao-Naga tribal people crossed the sacred water and settled in the land in which their present identity is derived. This return to Lungterok becomes a political act of re-rooting cultures and resisting the erasure of tribal identities, languages, and stories. The Indian education system hardly mentions tribal ways. In contexts where tribal histories and cultures are neglected and replaced—T. Ao’s mythic retelling enacts narrative autonomy, restoring cultural memory that predates both colonial mappings.

Dai’s *HM* resists cultural colonisation through subtle poetic decoloniality. Lines such as “Every morning when the forest wakes,” “For a seed falling so far down,” and “Are there caves and bats in your bosom” evoke tribal ancestral thought forms and memories embedded in the land/earth and nature, inseparable from human life. The intrinsic connection of the “seed” to the ground/soil, and the “mountain,” a home for animals, and the open spaces of hollow “caves” in the mountain for shelters and homes for all living, defies colonial erasure of the tribal world, rooted in their land and worldview. Even in a fragmented modern world, the poem asserts that tribal memory endures in natural entities. The colonial “Hello” addressed to the mountain becomes an act of decolonial activity. It rejects the reduction of land to a mere resource. Dai shifts “Hello” from anthropocentrism to eco-community centrism. It reaffirms an indigenous epistemology in which place is considered animate and relational (Deloria, 1992).

Chattering life, high above
Babel of tree dwellers.
For a seed falling so far down
Time is a given—to rise again,
A foothold
For the hunger of a weed,
Poison, colour, survival root
And the grass that never sleeps

(Dai, 2023, p. 19)

Alienation of life is presented in the poem through the compelling lines “Chattering life, high above, / Babel of tree dwellers... / For the hunger of a weed,” which portray a world stripped of its sacred essence, and manoeuvred by babbling, confusion, and hunger. A boundary of hopelessness is expressed in Dai’s comments on the estrangement of nature, the divine and human from each other. The costs of spatial dislocation point toward loss, but also a fresh start and reclamation. References to “Green mountains,” “your bosom,” “birth and time,” and “growing into a river” (p. 19) encode cultural memory within the mountain—voices threatened by erasure, marginalisation, and historical rewriting—underscoring a core concern of decolonial readings.

TRIBAL ECOLOGICAL READING

Ecology is a central theme in tribal folk literature, emphasising an intimate interrelationship among God, nature, and human beings as a cosmic community. Moreover, nature, especially land, is viewed as the moral teacher and guide for human beings in tribal life. For instance, a rooster serves as a timekeeper in tribal cosmology. Hence, tribal criticism should always ground its perspective on nature. Tribal reading of any literary text has to take a radical ecological approach involving a critical hermeneutic, identification, and retrieval. It demands a reading as part of the environment—the web of life—of the earth, as members of the cosmic community in solidarity with it. Nature is the creative centre of cosmic experiences, the ground of all beings. Ecosystem or space/land is emphatically affirmed as the starting point of the tribal episteme. Nature is always prioritised in tribal worldviews, not because others are neglected, but because it is the ground of life that nourishes and sustains it. Tribal communities, as Chakravarty (2015) notes, know, relate to, and protect nature, living in harmony with its “rhythmic cycles” rather than exploiting it (p. 1).

It is the space/land in which the God-nature-human continuum takes place (Longchar, 2012). The creation-centred view of the tribals is an inherent part of their worldview of the cosmic community. In that case, the ecosystem is the intersection point in the cosmic community, and eco-centred criticism is an intrinsic component of an all-embracing community where the environment is recognised and respected as it is; thus, dismantling any anthropocentric readings (Kamei, 2023). The sacred power and spirituality are derived from nature, and in the interrelationship between the divine-world-human, nature serves as the medium of this continuum. This relationship is interpreted as the spirit that sustains, nourishes, and gives life, shaping the entire reality. Given that, Longchar (1998, p. 66) remarks, “Creation becomes the basic component of the interpretation of history.” Hence, disrespect for land and nature is the root cause of the predicament facing the entire world. Moreover, every act of violence can be traced back to land/space issues. Therefore, all entities' inseparable oneness and eco-justice must be reflected in all their interpretations of texts. Overall, tribal eco-reading addresses the ecological problems by highlighting the organic oneness of all beings and promoting eco-justice through literary works and interpretations (Maisuangdibou, 2022). It depicts the suffering of one entity affecting the others and the entire cosmic cycle.

ECOLOGICAL INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN KIRE, AO, AND DAI

Kire's *SMF* functions as an ecological text. It presents an ethos where land, nature, spirituality, and identity are inseparably linked. The line “It is not right to be weaving in the morning when the field is calling us” (p. 11) prioritises sustenance over craft. Similarly, the line “The sun and rain are the Creator's blessings” (p. 13) affirms the Supreme Being's role in sustaining life. Furthermore, “They rain and shine in turns for us to make our fields and get our harvests” (p. 13) highlights humans' dependence on nature and divine blessing. All these notions connect to the tribal understanding of land (Maisuangdibou, 2022). The indigenous cultural practice of *genna*—“the *genna* days when no work was permitted” (pp. 14, 23)—gives rest not only to humans but to nature. It is a time for rejuvenation, which is a tribal way of liberative rest for all beings. More than that, the oneness of “man and tiger and spirit were once brothers” underscores the oneness of all. The divine, which is represented by the spirit; the ecosystem, represented by the tiger; and humanity, represented by the man; thus, depicting the essence of holistic interconnectedness.

SMF also reflects dependence on natural cycles: the rooster crowing “ku-ku-ruku—it is morning, get up, get up” (p. 25) situates survival within nature’s rhythms. Colonial intrusion—“occupying Angami lands, cut[ting] down their forest” (p. 91)—disrupts these relations, and punishing “those who dared to control their own destinies” (p. 108) is a supreme example of colonial legacies in the tribal world. Landscape is a living presence, not a backdrop, as seen in detailed depictions of Kovi’s house (pp. 1–2), Khonoma village (p. 47), and forests and rivers of the Naga hills. It is a critical exploration of tribal spatial and temporal epistemology. For tribals, land is sacred, a kin figure and moral guide. Through taboos, *gennas*, rituals, and selfless community living, the narrative embodies the God–nature–human continuum central to tribal epistemology (Thanzauva, 2022).

T. Ao’s *SPFL* interweaves ecological consciousness with mythic origin. She places Ao-Naga cosmology in a framework where spirits, land, fire, and humans are interconnected. Humans “Were born / Out of the womb / Of the earth” (p. 109), positioning Lungterok as both a geographic site and earth’s womb—source of life, culture, and spirituality. “Knowledgeable / In bird’s language / And animal discourse” (p. 109) recalls oral ecological knowledge, where animals, birds, and trees are teachers of spirituality, ethics, and aesthetics. Several tribal ways, such as interrelationships, community living, freedom, and ritual celebrations, are a direct replica of animals’ lives (Maisuangdibou, 2022). Apart from that, even the warfare—“the art of carving heads of enemies” (p. 109) is attributed to ants killing and taking their enemies’ heads. Thus, underscores non-human agency influencing human activities.

SPFL also highlights indigenous land-centred, survival and ecological skills in managing fundamental forces—water and fire—showing an intimate, practical relationship with nature for survival and harmony. “Finders of water / And fighters of fire” (p. 109)—and lists diverse roles:

The potters and weavers
Planters and growers
Hunters and cravers
Singers of songs and takers of heads,
Gentle lovers and savage heroes.
Builders of homes and destroyers of villages.”

(T. Ao, 2013, p. 110)

These professional roles link subsistence, share of responsibilities, culture, and ecosystem, revealing that environmental stewardship is inseparable from community identity. Every socio-economic skill plays a role in the community and contributes to the shared community's needs. Spiritual ecology is explicit in “The worshippers / Of unknown, unseen Spirits / Of trees and forests, / Of stones and rivers...” (p. 109). The lines depict a spiritual ecology, where Nature is sacred, sentient, and historically present—a moral and ecological guardian resisting exploitative modern approaches.

In *HM*, Dai personifies the mountain as a dialogical being. It echoes tribal ecological thought similar to Lungterok in *SPFL*. The mountain is a life-giver, custodian of the community’s origin, and memories. The opening line of *HM*, “Every morning when the forest wakes” (p. 19), speaks about the cycle of life. It is an intricate process of action and pause, revealing the profound ecological relationship with other realities as represented in indigenous eco-epistemology. Any disruption in this continuum signals rupture in cultural memory and spiritual bonding. The causes of disruption include deforestation, displacement, and degradation. In the contemporary situation, tribals globally face the issue of alienation from their land and culture—politically, economically, and culturally. The imagery of “chattering life,” “Babel,” “hunger,” and “poison” evokes

ecological decline. However, the interdependence endures, making the hill an active bearer of the interdependence of reality.

Dai's sensory imagery—"the idle moss" turning "to velvet," "Branches make signs"—demonstrates observational intimacy with the environment. Time is cyclical; the rooster is considered the timekeeper, mirroring indigenous ecological philosophy. An outlook that evokes the inter-connection between life and death. "Are there caves and bats in your bosom... A rock into a jewel?" (p. 19) embeds ecological knowledge in tribal poetic form, shaping identity through reverence, loss, and belonging—the mountain, an integral part of cosmic community, shelters cultural memory, space for the protection of life, vulnerable to erasure—a central tribal decolonial concern.

For a seed falling so far down
Time is a given—to rise again,
A foothold
For the hunger of a weed,
Poison, colour, survival root
And the grass that never sleeps

(Dai, 2023, p. 18)

The recurrence of death, rebirth and regeneration showcases a continuous cycle included in tribal oral narratives. It illustrates the perseverance, interdependence, and resilience of all life forms: seed, foothold, weed, root, and grass, each with a role in the holistic cosmological vision. Things ("hunger of a weed") that are unwanted for humans are unnecessarily bad for the earth. The "weed," "survival root," and "grass" could strengthen the land, soil and protect against erosion. The expression "And the grass that never sleeps" (p. 18) portrays the continual reinforcement of the grass to the soil. This process reinforces the land and protects the soil from erosion, symbolising a deeply-rooted foundation.

Across *SMF*, *SPFL*, and *HM*, land emerges as an animate, sacred, and relational entity profoundly linked with humans, spirits, trees, animals, and other beings. These works depict the ecological interconnectedness of all, embedding stewardship and sharing. They counter reductions of nature to resource, reaffirming indigenous worldviews that land is a gift of God and cannot be manipulated.

CONCLUSION

It is worth mentioning that tribal literature and criticism in India have come of age, and this study has demonstrated that indigenous-tribal literature and criticism are contributing to world literature. This dimension offers a distinctive tribal interpretive framework that resists assimilation into dominant critical paradigms. Through close readings of Kire, T. Ao, and Dai, it has been shown how tribal literature preserves cultural memory, ecological ethics, and spiritual oneness. In tribal belief and practice, the divine–nature–human continuum is inseparable, where land, rivers, and forests are communal. Thus, they provide a space for literary creativity. Tribal texts contest colonial epistemological erasures by reviving oral, performative, and expanding in writing. Key interpretative strategies—communitarian reading, storytelling, decolonial study, and ecological criticism reveal literature as an act of cultural reclamation.

Tribal criticism, however, must continue to maintain a dynamic engagement with broader critical discourses. While doing that, it needs to safeguard tribal epistemic distinctiveness. External frameworks can provide useful analytical tools, but they must be contextualised and adapted to tribal contexts to avoid intellectual extraction or the imposition of dominant interpretation and understanding of meaning. Positioning Indigenous ways of perception affirms that literature's interpretive horizon extends beyond the written texts, encompassing oral traditions and performative practices. In this manner, tribal criticism challenges the tendency to reduce tribal texts to ethnographic artefacts, reframing them as dynamic, intellectual and liberative. Overall, this work asserts tribal voice as an active force in enhancing global literary scholarship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the editor-in-chief, associate editor, and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and constructive comments, which helped us improve the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Ao, T. (2013). *Book of songs: Collected poems 1988–2007*. Heritage Publishing House.
- Benjamin, W. (2019). *The Storyteller essays* (T. Lewis, Trans.; S. Titan, Intro.). Review Books.
- Chakravarty, K. K. (2015). Introduction. In G.N. Devy, G. V. Davis & K. K. Chakravarty (Eds.). *Knowing differently: The challenge of the Indigenous* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.
- Dai, M. (2006). *The legends of Pensam*. Penguin.
- Dai, M. (2014). *The black hill*. Aleph Book Company.
- Dai, M. (2023). *The White shirts of summer: New and selected poems*. Speaking Tiger.
- Deloria, V. (1981). Identity and culture. *Daedalus*, 110(2), 13–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024722>
- Deloria, V. (1992). Spiritual management: Prospects for restoration on Tribal lands. *Restoration & Management Notes*, 10(1), 48–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43439970>
- Devy, G. N. (2002). Introduction. In G. N. Devy (Ed.), *Painted words: An anthology of tribal literature* (pp. x–xvi). Penguin Books.
- Fitzgerald, S. (2007). Assessing Native criticism. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 19(4), 173–174. <https://www-proquest.com/scholarly-journals/assessing-native-criticism/docview/210681304/se-2>
- Garneau, D. (2015, June). Indigenous criticism: On not walking with our sisters. *Border Crossings*, 34, 78–82. www-proquest-com-christuniversity.knimbus.com/magazines/indigenous-criticism-on-not-walking-with-our/docview/1688919484/se-2
- Golmei, A. (2017, May 23). *Let's talk about racism: Don't call us 'chinky, momo, chowmein', says a Northeastern woman*. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-s-talk-about-racism-don-t-call-us-chinki-momo-chowmien-asks-a-northeastern-woman/story-SJckp4InptNV6Te29dItJ.html>
- The Hindu. (2016, September 23). *Lit for Life: The Hindu Prize for 2015 goes to Easterine Kire*. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/lit-for-life/Lit-for-Life-The-Hindu-Prize-for-2015-goes-to-Easterine-Kire/article14003138.ece>
- The Hindu. (2024, March 28). *AFSPA extended in parts of Arunachal, Nagaland for six more months*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-extends-afspa-in-three-districts-three-police-stations-of-arunachal-pradesh-for-six-months/article68001962.ece>
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2016, July 22). *Who are the Indigenous and Tribal peoples?* <https://www.ilo.org/resource/who-are-indigenous-and-tribal-peoples>
- Kamei, A. (2023). An ecocritical study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*. In K. B. V. Pou (Ed.), *Keeper of stories: Critical readings of Easterine Kire's novels* (pp. 201–244). Highlander Press.
- Khanday, S. A. (2019). Challenges encountered by tribal population in the era of globalization. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 757–764. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2321-5828.2019.00124.4>
- Kire, E. (2014). *When the river sleeps*. Zubaan.
- Kire, E. (2018). *Sky is my father: A Naga village remembered*. Speaking Tiger.

- Longchar, A. W. (1998). A creation-poem of the Ao Nagas: A theological exploration. In A. W. Longchar & Y. Vashum (Eds.), *The tribal worldview and ecology* (pp. 53–68). Tribal Study Centre.
- Longchar, A. W. (2012). *Returning to Mother Earth*. Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia.
- Maisuangdibou, M. (2022). *Tribal literature, theology & methodology: Reading folklore for developing tribal theological hermeneutics and literary criticism*. Christian World Imprints.
- Marak, C. (2021). Introduction to Garo to English workshop, 29–31 May 2018. In C. Marak (Ed.), *Garo: A bird-eye view* (pp. vii–xxxiv). Sahitya Akademi.
- Meena, G. S. (2017). Tribal literature: Challenges and possibilities. In I. Kostka & P. Ranjan (Eds.), *The case for Bahujan literature* (pp. 79–83). The Marginalised.
- Meyer, L. N. (2001). In search of Native American aesthetics. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 35(4), 25–35. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/220653750?accountid=38885>
- Ministry of Home Affairs. (1958). *The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958*. Government of India. https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/armed_forces_special_powers_act1958.pdf
- Paliwal, A. (2024). Special powers, desperate acts: Constitutional collapse & militarism in India's Near East. In *India's Near East: A new history* (online ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197794692.003.0003>
- Pou, K. B. V. (2018). *Literary cultures of India's Northeast: Naga writings in English*. Heritage Publishing House.
- Rabani, G., & Mishra, B. (2023). Andaman Island and the historicity of colonial violence: An ecocritical study of Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Miraculous True History of Nomi Ali*. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature – The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 29(2), 57–69. <https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2023-2902-05>
- Shekhar, H. S. (2015). *The Adivasi will not dance: Stories*. Speaking Tiger.
- Smith, L. T. (2008). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.
- Thanzauva, K. (2022). *Theology of community: Tribal theology in the making* (Revised and enlarged ed.). Christian World Imprints.
- The Times of India. (2025, July 10). *37 years on, Nagas remember Oinam massacre during Operation Bluebird*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/37-years-on-nagas-remember-oinam-massacre-during-operation-bluebird/articleshow/122348882.cms>
- Vashum, Y. (2017). *Christology in context: A Tribal-Indigenous appraisal of North East India*. Christian World Imprints.
- Wakeham, P. (2022). Introducing students to Indigenous literatures at the graduate level: Reflections on engaging advanced learners. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 34(1), 43–58. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/introducing-students-indigenous-literatures-at/docview/2706468270/se-2>
- Womack, C. S. (2008). A single decade: Book-length Native literary criticism between 1986 and 1997. In C. S. Womack, D. H. Justice, & C. B. Teuton (Eds.), *Reasoning together: The Native critics collective* (pp. 3–104). University of Oklahoma Press. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Reasoning_Together/Zj79HmexugcC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Reasoning+together+:+the+native+critics+collective&printsec=frontcover