

Voices of Strength: Spirituality and Inner Power in the Works of North East Women Writers

Dr. Rituparna Mahapatra

State Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Belda College, Belda,
Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal.

ABSTRACT

The literature of North East India occupies a distinctive place in Indian writing because it grows from a dense interaction among oral tradition, land-based memory, community ritual, colonial encounter, Christianity, indigenous cosmologies, and long histories of conflict. Within this literary field, women writers have made especially significant contributions by reshaping questions of identity, belonging, suffering, memory, and ethical endurance. This paper examines how spirituality and inner power are represented in selected works by Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, and Indira Goswami. It argues that spirituality in these writers is not merely doctrinal or institutional. Rather, it emerges through relationships with landscape, ancestral memory, the supernatural, grief, silence, moral struggle, and women's capacity to endure and reinterpret pain. In these writings, inner power rarely appears as loud rebellion alone; it often takes the form of survival, witness, compassion, recollection, self-recognition, and the refusal to surrender one's humanity. Mamang Dai presents nature as sacred presence and spiritual homeland. Easterine Kire draws on Naga cosmology to imagine the visible and invisible worlds as deeply connected. Temsula Ao locates strength in women's endurance amid violence and historical rupture. Indira Goswami transforms suffering into ethical and spiritual inquiry, particularly through her portrayals of widowhood, deprivation, and the contradictions of sacred spaces. Together, these writers broaden literary understandings of women's strength by showing that spiritual consciousness may itself be a form of resistance, healing, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: North East India, Women's Writing, Spirituality, Inner Power, Indigenous Literature, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Indira Goswami.

Introduction

Writing from North East India in English has developed through a historical and cultural situation quite different from the mainstream canon of Indian English literature. Scholars of the field have noted the centrality of oral traditions, multilingual environments, tribal and ethnic memory, Biblical influence in some regions, and close bonds between land and selfhood. These features are not decorative background elements; they shape literary form, theme, and the very vocabulary through which writers imagine identity. In the case of women writers, this literary process becomes even more compelling, because their texts often negotiate both collective histories and gendered

experience at once. Women writers from the region do not simply “add” female perspectives to an existing archive. They frequently transform the archive itself by bringing domestic memory, embodied suffering, ritual life, inherited story, and community silence into the centre of literary meaning.

A major strength of North East women’s writing lies in the way it challenges narrow definitions of power. In many modern critical frameworks, power is often read primarily through overt political speech, institutional visibility, or direct social confrontation. Such categories are useful, but they are not sufficient for reading these writers. In their works, power may reside in song, remembrance, ethical steadiness, listening, bodily endurance, the keeping of stories, reverence for land, and the ability to survive damaged histories without losing inward depth. Spirituality, similarly, cannot be reduced to formal religion. In these texts it may be indigenous, animistic, Christian, syncretic, ethical, ecological, or profoundly personal. It may emerge through mountain, river, dream, ancestor, prayer, ritual, or compassion. Such spirituality offers not escape from the world, but a way of inhabiting it with dignity.

The field itself has increasingly been recognized as one shaped by women’s voices, oral heritage, and new literary institutions. An overview of writing from the region notes that women writers often drew on oral traditions and the Bible, while later work linked land, language, and identity in especially powerful ways. The anthology *The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland* similarly describes women’s writing in Nagaland through tattoos, Christianity, woven story, orality, war, conflict, and the making of English into a lived language of expression. This broader context is crucial, because the works discussed in this paper are not isolated achievements. They belong to a larger literary movement in which women recover memory, negotiate fractured histories, and reinterpret culture from within.

The present study focuses on four major writers whose works illuminate different dimensions of spirituality and inner power: Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao from Nagaland, and Indira Goswami from Assam. Mamang Dai has written extensively about the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh and is widely associated with a landscape-centred, spiritually resonant poetics. Easterine Kire’s writing is deeply connected to Naga oral history and what her publisher describes as the spiritual universe of the Nagas. Temsula Ao’s creative and scholarly work is rooted in oral tradition, myth, and the lived realities of Naga society, including violence and collective memory. Indira Goswami, one of the most important Assamese writers of modern India and recipient of the Jnanpith Award, is known for her compassionate portrayal of widows, laborers, and other vulnerable lives. Though they differ in style and location, all four writers insist that women’s inner lives are serious sites of literary knowledge.

This paper argues that the writings of these women authors offer a layered understanding of strength. Their female worlds are not simple narratives of victimhood, nor do they always conform to modern slogans of liberation. Instead, they present inwardness as agency. They reveal that spiritual imagination can preserve selfhood when social structures fail; that memory can be a mode of resistance; that the sacred may reside in nature as much as in institution; and that women’s endurance

is not passive submission but an active reworking of pain into meaning. Such texts remain highly relevant to literary studies because they expand how power, spirituality, and womanhood may be read together in Indian literature.

Objectives of the Study

This study has four main objectives:

1. To examine how spirituality is represented in selected works of North East women writers.
2. To analyze the idea of inner power as survival, memory, ethical endurance, and self-realization.
3. To compare how different writers connect women's experience with landscape, community, suffering, and the sacred.
4. To show that women's writing from North East India offers a broader and more culturally grounded understanding of strength than many simplified feminist or nationalist readings allow.

Main Subject Matters

1. Spirituality, Orality, and Women's Writing in the North East

Any discussion of spirituality in North East women's writing must begin with the region's oral and cultural inheritance. One major study of three women poets from the region argues that orality is central to the reclamation of identity, especially through traditional tales, formulaic expression, and indigenized vocabulary. This matters because spirituality in such writing is rarely abstract. It is carried by spoken rhythm, collective memory, inherited symbols, and names for the natural world that are rooted in community life. The movement from oral performance to written text does not erase the sacred dimension of these traditions; it often preserves and reshapes it. Women writers, in particular, become keepers and re-interpreters of this memory.

This relationship between orality and identity is also tied closely to land. A broad overview of North East writing notes that oral traditions in the region are deeply connected to land as an indispensable part of self-identity. In such a framework, the river, mountain, forest, and village are not inert settings. They are living presences that structure emotion, belonging, and cosmology. This is one reason spirituality in these writers often appears ecological before it appears doctrinal. The sacred is encountered in the material world, but not in a reductively material way. Nature is storied, remembered, inhabited by ancestors, or touched by unseen presences. Women's experience enters this sacred geography through labor, ritual, mourning, desire, and cultural transmission.

The presence of Christianity in parts of the region complicates rather than cancels indigenous worldviews. Jobeth Ann Warjri observes that in Christian-dominated regions, women writers often drew both on oral tradition and the Bible, producing a distinctive literary aesthetic. This hybrid imagination is important for reading writers such as Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire. Their texts do not simply replace indigenous spirituality with formal religion. Instead, they register overlap, tension, adaptation, and coexistence. In this sense, spirituality in North East women's writing is dynamic. It lives in thresholds: between old and new, oral and written, village and modernity, wound and healing, body and spirit.

What follows from this is a more nuanced understanding of inner power. Inner power in these writings is not always self-assertion in the modern individualist sense. It may be the ability to remain human amid militarization, to maintain reverence in a damaged world, to carry inherited stories without romanticizing them, or to confront oppressive customs without losing moral tenderness. That combination of cultural depth and inward resilience is one of the defining strengths of North East women's literature.

2. Mamang Dai: Landscape as Sacred Memory

Mamang Dai's writing offers one of the most compelling examples of spiritual landscape in contemporary Indian literature. Penguin describes her as a writer who has written extensively about the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh, and critical overviews of North East writing repeatedly associate her work with land-based identity and indigenous worldview. In Dai's imaginative universe, landscape is never only scenery. It is archive, witness, and metaphysical presence. Her poems and prose return again and again to rivers, mountains, villages, ritual, and memory not as nostalgic objects, but as living sources of being.

Warjri's survey is especially useful here because it paraphrases Dai's own explanation of indigenous belief: the world is animated, and all life is sacred. This worldview, associated with Donyi-Polo in the Adi context, helps us understand why the environment in Dai's work carries ethical and spiritual force. The mountains and rivers do not merely symbolize emotion; they participate in it. They hold ancestral memory and give shape to communal continuity. Such writing invites readers to see spirituality not as transcendence away from the earth, but as intimacy with the earth. That intimacy becomes a form of strength because it anchors the self against displacement, erasure, and modern fragmentation.

In *River Poems* and *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai frequently moves through remembered landscapes where myth, story, weather, silence, and daily life blur into one another. *Pensam* itself suggests an inward realm of memory and wonder. Her writing does not flatten this world into folklore for external consumption. Instead, it creates a literary space where indigenous consciousness remains intellectually serious and emotionally complex. Women in such a world are not outside spirituality; they inhabit it as daughters, mothers, witnesses, mourners, and bearers of tradition. Their strength is inseparable from their capacity to remain in conversation with the land and with the invisible histories stored within it.

Another striking feature of Dai's writing is its tonal restraint. She rarely dramatizes power in theatrical terms. Her work is quieter, but not weaker for that reason. It derives force from composure, from the patience of observation, from the trust that memory can hold what official history ignores. This is particularly important for women's writing, because it challenges the assumption that only dramatic rebellion counts as agency. In Dai, agency may consist in remembering correctly, naming carefully, and refusing to sever the self from the living world that formed it. Spirituality becomes the ground of this agency because it restores relation: between person and place, present and past, human and non-human.

Thus, Mamang Dai's contribution to the theme of inner power lies in her ability to imagine women's strength through rootedness. She suggests that a person who belongs deeply—to land, memory, and community—possesses a form of inward steadiness that resists both cultural amnesia and spiritual emptiness. Hers is a poetics of calm endurance, where the sacred is not distant but diffused through daily existence.

3. Easterine Kire: The Spiritual Universe of the Nagas

If Mamang Dai offers a poetics of sacred landscape, Easterine Kire offers a fiction of spiritual passage. Her Penguin author page explicitly notes her interest in exploring the spiritual universe of the Nagas, while publisher descriptions of *When the River Sleeps* emphasize dreams, spirits, daemons, supernatural danger, and a landscape alive with wonder. These details are not ornamental fantasy. They point to a cosmological order in which the visible world is continuously crossed by the invisible. In Kire's writing, spiritual experience is often a test of character, perception, and desire.

When the River Sleeps is central to any discussion of spirituality and inner power in Kire's work. The novel follows a solitary quest, but the deeper journey is ethical and spiritual. The protagonist must confront forces that are not only external but inward: fear, ambition, temptation, and vulnerability. The publisher's description foregrounds unquiet spirits, sorceresses, and dangerous enchantment, while another description stresses the novel's reverence for land, belief, and community rhythms. Taken together, these elements show that Kire's spiritual world is not escapist. It is morally demanding. The supernatural exists, but access to it requires discipline, humility, and an understanding of consequence.

Although *When the River Sleeps* centers on a male seeker, it remains highly relevant to the study of women's writing because the narrative method and cosmological imagination are shaped by a woman author's recovery of cultural memory. Kire's significance is not limited to representation of female characters alone; it also lies in the authority with which she reclaims Naga metaphysics as literary knowledge. She writes from a tradition in which dreams, spirits, and ancestral presences remain intelligible, and she asks the modern reader to inhabit that reality without condescension. This itself is a powerful literary act. It restores dignity to indigenous spirituality and resists the assumption that rational modernity alone defines truth.

Kire's broader body of work also shows that strength is inseparable from storytelling. Her publishers describe her as deeply engaged with oral history and Naga narrative traditions, and note that one of her earliest novels was the first Naga novel published in English. Such milestones matter because they reveal a writer working at the frontier between preservation and innovation. Inner power in Kire's literary world often emerges through continuity: the survival of story, the endurance of a people's cosmology, the refusal to let land lose its sacred character, and the capacity to face violence without surrendering one's imaginative inheritance.

Her contribution to the idea of women's strength is therefore subtle and expansive. She demonstrates that women writers can create not only social critique, but entire metaphysical worlds. Such work enlarges feminist literary discussion because it shows that women's agency may lie in cultural

guardianship, spiritual imagination, and narrative sovereignty. Kire's writing insists that a people cannot remain inwardly alive if they lose the sacred grammar through which they understand fear, death, dream, and belonging.

4. Temsula Ao: Endurance, Memory, and the Moral Life of Women

Temsula Ao's literary universe is shaped by oral tradition, myth, and Naga history, but it is also marked by the wounds of conflict. Sahitya Akademi's profile notes that her works are shaped by oral tradition and myths, and the same profile identifies *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* as major short story collections. The profile also observes that the stories in *These Hills Called Home* revolve largely around women, who bear the brunt of violence. This is a crucial entry point into Ao's treatment of spirituality and strength. For her, inner power is not abstract serenity. It is what remains when public life has been broken by insurgency, fear, and militarization.

The Zubaan description of *These Hills Called Home* similarly emphasizes decades of bloodshed, the Naga search for identity, and the ways ordinary people cope with violence while seeking spaces of safety and even joy. Ao's genius lies in her refusal to romanticize suffering. Women in her fiction are not icons of sacrifice; they are human beings negotiating terror, humiliation, memory, and care. Yet amid this harshness, her writing repeatedly suggests an inner reserve that violence cannot fully destroy. That reserve may appear in quiet gestures, in the preservation of tenderness, in the ability to tell what happened, or in the insistence that everyday life must continue.

Ao's work is especially powerful because it links suffering with moral witness. Her stories do not merely document conflict; they ask what it does to the inner life. How does one continue to believe in community after betrayal? How does one inhabit home when home has become a war zone? How does a woman remain emotionally alive when history has entered her body through fear, rape, disappearance, or grief? These questions give her writing a spiritual seriousness. The answer is never easy triumph. Instead, strength appears as survival without dehumanization, memory without hatred, and endurance without total silence.

Aosenla's Story takes this inward focus further. Zubaan describes the novel as the story of a woman coming to terms with herself and reflecting on the life others made for her and the life she finally created. This movement from externally shaped existence to self-recognition is one of Ao's most important contributions to women's writing. Here inner power is deeply introspective. It lies in the capacity to revisit the past, to see the structures that confined one's life, and to claim interpretive authority over one's own history. Spirituality enters not through overt ritual but through inward reckoning: a slow, ethically charged search for selfhood.

Ao therefore expands the meaning of strength in two ways. First, she shows women enduring communal violence with extraordinary emotional intelligence. Second, she shows that self-understanding is itself a profound form of liberation. In both cases, her writing refuses spectacle. The deepest transformations occur within consciousness. By linking women's lives to memory, oral tradition, and moral endurance, Ao creates a body of work in which spirituality appears as the refusal to let violence dictate the final meaning of existence.

5. Indira Goswami: Suffering, Compassion, and Ethical Spirituality

Indira Goswami occupies a somewhat different location within North East women's writing, yet she is indispensable to this discussion. The Library of Congress describes her as one of the pre-eminent contemporary Assamese writers and emphasizes her empathy and compassion in writing about laborers, urban hardship, and widows in Vrindavan and Assam. Jnanpith records her as the 2000 recipient of the award for Assamese literature. These facts indicate not only her stature but also the ethical range of her work. Spirituality in Goswami is rarely consoling. It is critical, wounded, and ethically restless.

Her fiction repeatedly stages the contradiction between sacred spaces and human cruelty. *The Blue-necked God* is described by Zubaan as an early novel exposing the exploitation and poverty of widows abandoned in a supposedly holy city. *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* likewise centers on widows and the decaying social structures surrounding them. In Goswami, the spiritual sphere is never detached from material suffering. Temples, prayer, ritual purity, and moral codes become suspect when they coexist with women's humiliation. Yet Goswami does not reject spirituality itself. Rather, she distinguishes living compassion from dead orthodoxy.

This distinction is the source of her idea of inner power. Goswami's women often inhabit unbearable circumstances, but their inward life remains morally alive. They feel desire, shame, loneliness, tenderness, and revolt. The strength of these characters lies not in heroic posture, but in their refusal to become spiritually numb. Even when trapped within oppressive institutions, they continue to long, question, and suffer consciously. Goswami turns this consciousness into critique. The reader is forced to ask whether a religious or social order that destroys compassion can still claim sacred legitimacy.

Unlike writers whose spirituality is more explicitly ecological or cosmological, Goswami's spiritual mode is often ethical and tragic. She dwells in contradiction: holiness and decay, faith and exploitation, devotion and bodily deprivation. That tension gives her work unusual force. She shows that women's inner power may consist in preserving moral truth even when the institutions around them are false. To endure such contradiction without surrendering one's capacity for feeling is itself a form of spiritual resilience.

Goswami's importance to this paper lies in how she broadens the category of spirituality. She reminds us that spirituality is not only wonder, communion, or ritual belonging. It may also be anguish before injustice. It may be the capacity to recognize the sacred worth of lives that society degrades. Her writing makes compassion intellectually sharp and ethically disruptive. In that sense, her work stands beside that of Dai, Kire, and Ao as another powerful articulation of women's strength: not the strength of domination, but the strength of humane consciousness.

6. Comparative Discussion: Redefining Strength

When read together, these four writers offer a remarkably rich map of spirituality and inner power. Mamang Dai locates strength in belonging to a sacred landscape and in sustaining an ecological imagination rooted in indigenous philosophy. Easterine Kire presents strength as the capacity to

move through a world where dream, spirit, and danger are real, and where cultural memory remains a guide to moral survival. Temsula Ao discovers power in women's endurance, witness, and inward reckoning amid violence. Indira Goswami turns suffering itself into ethical insight, exposing the hollowness of institutions that claim sanctity while failing the vulnerable.

What unites them is not a single doctrine of spirituality. Rather, it is a shared refusal to treat the inner life as secondary. These writers insist that women's consciousness matters: their memory, grief, moral perception, and relation to the sacred are central literary concerns. They also complicate modern assumptions that power must always look public, aggressive, or declarative. In these texts, strength often appears as keeping faith with memory, land, compassion, or selfhood when external structures are collapsing. Such a model is especially important for literary criticism because it values forms of endurance and inwardness that are often overlooked.

Their work also challenges simplistic binaries between tradition and liberation. Indigenous memory can nourish freedom; religion can both oppress and console; silence can be both wound and strength; the sacred can be found in forest, river, village, ritual, and ethical rebellion. By attending to these tensions, North East women writers create a literary language in which spiritual depth and feminist significance need not oppose one another. Instead, they illuminate each other. A woman may become powerful not by abandoning tradition wholesale, but by reading it anew, questioning it from within, or carrying forward only what preserves dignity.

For this reason, these writers remain deeply relevant to contemporary literary study. They offer models of womanhood beyond cliché, of spirituality beyond dogma, and of resistance beyond slogan. Their works call for a criticism capable of reading land as memory, pain as knowledge, and inwardness as agency. That is their enduring intellectual contribution.

Conclusion

The writings of Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, and Indira Goswami reveal that North East women's literature cannot be adequately understood through narrow categories of regionalism, victimhood, or social protest alone. These writers produce a far more layered literary world, one in which spirituality is intertwined with ecology, memory, oral tradition, suffering, and moral resilience. Their women are not merely acted upon by history; they interpret it, endure it, and sometimes quietly transform its meaning. Inner power in these works is not always dramatic or externally visible. It may appear in the ability to remain rooted, to remember, to question, to care, to survive violence without surrendering tenderness, or to expose the gap between sacred claims and human injustice.

What emerges from this study is a broader understanding of women's strength. Mamang Dai sacralizes landscape and belonging. Easterine Kire restores the metaphysical richness of Naga cosmology. Temsula Ao gives voice to women's endurance within collective trauma. Indira Goswami turns compassion into a radical ethical force. Together, they show that spirituality can be a source of literary resistance, cultural continuity, and inner renewal. Their works ask readers to recognize that the deepest power may not lie in conquest, but in consciousness. It may lie in the quiet yet unyielding human capacity to carry pain, memory, and hope without losing one's soul.

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