



Original Article

Assamese Indigenous Literature and Global Modernism

Binanda Boruah

Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese, Purbanchal College, Silapathar

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Correspondence Address:

Binanda Boruah
Assistant Professor,
Department of Assamese,
Purbanchal College,
Silapathar
Email:
binandaboruah777@gmail.com

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Abstract

Assamese indigenous literature, rooted in oral traditions, folk performances, and myths of origin, provides a vibrant window into the cultural psyche of Assam. Unlike written forms of literature shaped by elite institutions, these indigenous creations embody community memory, ecological wisdom, and spiritual values transmitted across generations. They are not just texts but living performances that connect people to their environment, ancestors, and collective identity. In the twentieth century, Assamese literature entered into conversation with the intellectual and aesthetic energies of global modernism. Modernism emphasized experimental form, subjective consciousness, and a questioning of established traditions. When these global ideas intersected with the indigenous cultural expressions of Assam, they created a unique literary field marked by negotiation, conflict, and synthesis. This paper critically examines the dynamic relationship between Assamese indigenous literature and global modernism. It traces continuities and ruptures between oral traditions and modernist writing, emphasizing both aesthetic techniques and cultural themes. The research highlights the creative strategies of Assamese writers such as Nilmani Phookan and Indira Goswami, who simultaneously engaged with indigenous sources and modernist sensibilities. It also discusses the risks of cultural dilution alongside the opportunities for renewal and global recognition. The study argues that Assamese indigenous literature demonstrates resilience and adaptability in the face of modernist transformations. Rather than being overshadowed by global modernism, it has rearticulated its presence by absorbing and transforming external influences. In doing so, Assamese literature has not only preserved its cultural identity but has also become a significant voice within the broader field of world literature.

Keywords: Assamese Indigenous Literature, Global Modernism, Folklore, Oral Traditions, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Literature, Literary Transformation

Introduction

Assamese literature represents a rich mosaic of cultural experience, continuously shaped by history, migration, ecological environment, and religious practices. Among its many strands, indigenous literature occupies a foundational role. Goswami, (2014) shows that rooted in folk epics, seasonal songs, ritual chants, and mythological tales, these works are not mere entertainments but vessels of cultural memory. They mirror the agrarian rhythms of Assamese society and reflect its intimate relationship with rivers, forests, and mountains (Goswami, 2014, p. 87). For centuries, oral traditions such as Ojapali performances, Burhi Aair Xadhu (grandmother's tales), and tribal chants of the Bodo, Karbi, and Mising communities have shaped Assamese identity. They embody the voices of communities often excluded from mainstream histories, preserving stories of resilience, ecological wisdom, and spiritual continuity. The twentieth century, however, brought unprecedented shifts in literary imagination. Global modernism, which emerged in Europe as a response to industrialization, war, and cultural disillusionment, spread across continents. Defined by experimentation, fragmentation, and self-reflexivity, modernism questioned inherited traditions and sought new modes of expression (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991, p. 54). Assamese literature, too, came under its influence. Writers such as Homen Borgohain, Nilmani Phookan, and Mamoni Raisom Goswami absorbed modernist aesthetics but remained deeply rooted in local cultural realities. The central problem this paper explores is the negotiation between indigenous traditions and global modernist aesthetics. Rather than treating them as binary opposites, this study argues that the two interact dynamically, creating hybrid literary forms that preserve cultural identity while situating Assamese literature within global discourses.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the defining features of Assamese indigenous literature.
- To examine the key characteristics of global modernism and its influence on regional literatures.
- To analyze the interplay between Assamese oral traditions and modernist aesthetics.
- To study representative Assamese writers who embody this synthesis.
- To evaluate the role of indigenous traditions in preserving cultural identity in a globalizing context.

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- To highlight the position of Assamese indigenous literature within world literature.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this research is confined to Assamese indigenous literary traditions and their encounter with modernist aesthetics. It explores folk epics, ritual performances, tribal myths, and oral narratives, as well as modern Assamese literature that engages with these traditions. While connections with other South Asian literatures are acknowledged, the focus remains primarily on Assamese examples. The study covers both oral and written forms but avoids detailed linguistic analysis, concentrating instead on thematic and cultural dimensions.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three main reasons. First, it foregrounds Assamese indigenous traditions in the broader debate on world literature. Indigenous forms are often examined in isolation, yet their dialogue with modernist aesthetics reveals how literature adapts and survives under global pressures. Second, the analysis highlights the resilience of cultural memory, showing how oral narratives are not erased but reconfigured in modernist texts. Finally, the study underscores the relevance of Assamese literature in contemporary times, when globalization and homogenization often threaten cultural distinctiveness.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach:

- **Textual Analysis** – Close reading of Assamese folk texts such as Oi Nitam songs of the Misings, Ojapali narratives, and selected modern Assamese works.
- **Comparative Framework** – Situating Assamese indigenous traditions alongside global modernist works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922).
- **Use of Secondary Sources** – Drawing from scholarly works, critical essays, and literary histories.
- **Postcolonial Lens** – Examining the negotiation of tradition and modernity in the context of colonial and postcolonial pressures.

Review of Literature

Scholars have long emphasized the role of folklore in shaping Assamese identity. Goswami (2014) notes that oral traditions are the "soul of Assamese cultural consciousness" (p. 91). Medhi (2011) highlights the ecological and spiritual values embedded in indigenous myths. Dutta (2007) argues that folklore not only preserves memory but also strengthens community solidarity.

On global modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane (1991) provide one of the most authoritative accounts, while Chaudhuri (2002) situates modernism within Indian cultural contexts. Within Assam, Sarma (2018) traces how Nilmani Phookan's poetry reconfigures indigenous imagery into modernist abstraction. Ahmed (2022) emphasizes the continuing relevance of folklore in shaping Assamese identity in modern times.

Despite these contributions, very few works explicitly connect Assamese indigenous traditions with global modernism. This gap motivates the present study.

Discussion and Analysis

Indigenous Foundations of Assamese Literature

Dutta (2007) noticed that Assamese indigenous literature is profoundly oral and performative. Ojapali performances, which combine song, dance, and storytelling, narrate mythological tales with communal participation.

The Misings' Oi Nitam songs celebrate agrarian life and ecological ties with rivers and forests. The Karbis preserve cosmological myths that articulate a unique vision of creation. Unlike individualistic modernist texts, these traditions emphasize collectivity, spirituality, and ecological harmony (Dutta, 2007, p. 142).

Characteristics of Global Modernism

Modernism, emerging in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, was marked by disillusionment with Victorian realism. It embraced fragmentation, symbolism, and psychological depth. Writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce experimented with form to capture modern anxieties (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991, p. 112). Modernism quickly spread globally, inspiring Indian writers such as Tagore and Jibanananda Das (Chaudhuri, 2002, p. 94).

Interaction between Indigenous Literature and Modernism in Assam

The encounter between Assamese indigenous literature and modernism can be seen in:

Aesthetic Innovation – Nilmani Phookan's poetry integrates indigenous motifs—birds, rivers, forests—into abstract modernist landscapes (Sarma, 2018, p. 212).

Narrative Techniques – Indira Goswami used nonlinear structures and psychological exploration while grounding her narratives in Assamese cultural contexts.

Themes of Resistance – Indigenous values of community and ecological balance reappear in modernist Assamese literature as critiques of alienation, social marginalization, and postcolonial identity struggles.

Hybrid Forms – Modern Assamese theatre often blends bhaona traditions with fragmented modernist storytelling.

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges: Indigenous forms risk dilution when reframed through modernist techniques; global trends often privilege Western frameworks, marginalizing local voices.

Opportunities: Indigenous motifs gain renewed vitality in modernist works; Assamese literature secures a place in global conversations while retaining cultural specificity.

Comparative Insights

The Assamese experience parallels other world literatures. Irish poet W.B. Yeats drew upon Celtic folklore to enrich modernist poetry, while African writers reinterpreted tribal myths through modernist forms. Assamese writers likewise transformed oral traditions into global modernist aesthetics, situating themselves within postcolonial modernism.

Conclusion and Findings

This study concludes that Assamese indigenous literature and global modernism interact not in opposition but through creative negotiation. Oral traditions, while deeply rooted in community values, adapt to modernist aesthetics, producing hybrid works that are both local and global.

Findings:

- Assamese indigenous literature safeguards cultural identity through oral traditions.
- Global modernism introduced experimental forms that reshaped Assamese writing.
- Writers such as Nilmani Phookan and Indira Goswami embody the synthesis of indigenous and modernist aesthetics.
- The interaction fosters hybrid literary forms that retain distinctiveness while achieving global recognition.
- The negotiation reflects broader postcolonial dynamics of identity, resistance, and creativity.



- Assamese literature remains relevant both as cultural heritage and as a participant in world literary debates.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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