

# Code-Switching as Resistance: Linguistic Hybridity in Northeast Indian Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the complex relationship between language, identity, and resistance in contemporary Northeast Indian fiction, foregrounding code-switching as a significant literary and political strategy. Situated within the intersecting frameworks of postcolonial theory, sociolinguistics, and discourse studies, this paper aims to explore how linguistic hybridity functions not merely as a reflection of multilingual realities but as a deliberate act of cultural assertion and ideological defiance. Writers from Northeast India frequently interweave English with indigenous languages such as Ao, Adi, Khasi, Mizo, Assamese, and Nagamese, thereby unsettling the authority of standardized Indian English and resisting homogenizing national and colonial linguistic structures. Through sustained textual engagement with selected works by Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Aruni Kashyap, and Rita Chowdhury, the study examines the narrative and political implications of lexical insertion, dialogic shifts, syntactic hybridity, and untranslatability. Drawing upon Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of hybridity, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, and sociolinguistic theories of code-switching advanced by Gumperz and Myers-Scotton, the paper situates linguistic hybridity within broader debates on subaltern agency and decolonial aesthetics. By interrogating the politics of language in a historically marginalized region, the research contributes to contemporary discussions in Indian English studies and postcolonial linguistics, arguing for a reconceptualization of code-switching as a transformative literary practice rather than a peripheral stylistic feature.

**Keywords:** Code-switching, Linguistic hybridity, Northeast India, Postcolonial, Heteroglossia, Identity construction.

## Introduction

Language in postcolonial societies is never an innocent medium of communication; it is deeply implicated in histories of conquest, cultural negotiation, and identity formation. In multilingual contexts, particularly those marked by colonial intervention, language becomes a terrain where authority and resistance continually intersect. Northeast India presents one of the most compelling linguistic landscapes within the Indian subcontinent. Comprising states such as

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Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Sikkim, the region is home to hundreds of indigenous languages belonging primarily to Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic families, alongside Indo-Aryan Assamese and the institutional presence of English. This dense multilingual ecology has shaped a distinctive literary tradition in which English functions simultaneously as an enabling and unsettling force.

The colonial introduction of English through missionary education and administrative structures reconfigured indigenous linguistic hierarchies. English gradually became associated with literacy, institutional mobility, and modernity, while many indigenous languages were confined to oral domains or localized usage. Post-independence nation-building further complicated this linguistic terrain. The Indian state's emphasis on integration and administrative uniformity often marginalized the cultural specificities of the Northeast, intensifying anxieties regarding identity and autonomy (Baruah, 2005). In such a context, language assumes heightened political significance. It becomes not only a vehicle of expression but also a symbol of belonging, resistance, and cultural continuity.

The emergence of English-language fiction from the Northeast must therefore be understood within this layered historical framework. Writers from the region have increasingly turned to English as a medium for articulating experiences of insurgency, displacement, ecological consciousness, gendered marginalization, and spiritual cosmology. However, their engagement with English is rarely characterized by uncritical adoption. Instead, these writers reshape English through acts of linguistic hybridity, embedding indigenous words, idioms, syntactic patterns, and oral rhythms within the narrative fabric. This practice, commonly described as code-switching, exceeds the boundaries of casual bilingual speech and becomes a deliberate literary strategy.

Within sociolinguistics, code-switching has traditionally been defined as the alternation between two or more languages within a single interaction or utterance (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1982). Early research focused on structural constraints and conversational functions, examining how bilingual speakers navigate social contexts through language choice (Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993). While these studies illuminate the patterned nature of bilingual speech, they often remain confined to spoken discourse and empirical analysis. The extension of code-switching into literary texts raises new questions that transcend sociolinguistic functionality. In fiction, language alternation is not spontaneous but curated; it is crafted to produce aesthetic effect, cultural resonance, and ideological intervention.

Theoretical developments within postcolonial studies provide a productive lens through which to interpret such literary code-switching. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) argue that postcolonial writers "abrogate" the authority of Standard English and "appropriate" it to articulate local realities. This dual movement destabilizes the normative status of English while retaining its communicative reach. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), in contrast, advocates for the abandonment of colonial languages in favor of indigenous tongues, viewing linguistic decolonization as essential to cultural liberation. Between these positions lies Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) influential concept of hybridity, which reframes colonial language not as a static instrument of domination but as a dynamic site of negotiation. Hybridity, for Bhabha,

produces a “third space” in which cultural meanings are neither wholly colonizer nor colonized but are rearticulated through ambivalence and transformation.

Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of heteroglossia further deepens this theoretical terrain by foregrounding the multiplicity of voices within language. For Bakhtin, every utterance carries traces of social struggle, and literary texts become arenas where competing speech types intersect. When Northeast Indian writers incorporate indigenous lexicons into English narratives, they generate heteroglossic textures that challenge monologic authority. English ceases to function as a singular, stable medium; instead, it becomes stratified and dialogic.

Despite these rich theoretical resources, scholarship on Northeast Indian literature has often prioritized thematic analysis over linguistic inquiry. Studies frequently examine insurgency, border politics, ecological consciousness, or gendered trauma (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 2014), yet the linguistic strategies that underpin these thematic concerns receive comparatively limited attention. This imbalance reflects a broader disciplinary divide between literary criticism and sociolinguistics. Literary scholars may acknowledge the presence of indigenous words but rarely analyze their structural or ideological functions in depth, while sociolinguists seldom engage with fictional texts as sites of meaningful code-switching.

The present study seeks to bridge this gap by positioning code-switching at the center of literary analysis. Rather than treating linguistic hybridity as incidental or ornamental, the paper conceptualizes it as a mode of resistance embedded within narrative form. In the context of Northeast India—where questions of identity, autonomy, and representation remain politically charged—language alternation acquires heightened significance. The insertion of an indigenous term into English prose may appear minor at the surface level, yet it disrupts the illusion of linguistic homogeneity and asserts the presence of alternative epistemologies.

Furthermore, the politics of translation and untranslatability intensify this disruption. When writers choose not to translate certain words, they create moments of semantic opacity that resist domestication. Venuti (1995) describes foreignization in translation as an ethical strategy that preserves linguistic difference rather than erasing it for reader comfort. In Northeast Indian fiction, similar strategies compel readers to confront unfamiliar cultural frameworks. The refusal to gloss indigenous expressions challenges the expectation that English must remain transparent and universally accessible.

This paper therefore asks to what extent does code-switching in Northeast Indian fiction function as a conscious strategy of resistance against linguistic and cultural homogenization? How do indigenous lexical insertions, dialogic shifts, and syntactic hybridity reconfigure English as a medium of narrative authority? And in what ways does linguistic hybridity intersect with questions of gender, memory, spirituality, and political dissent?

To address these questions, the study engages with selected works by Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Aruni Kashyap, and Rita Chowdhury writers whose texts exemplify the region’s multilingual aesthetics. Through qualitative textual analysis informed by sociolinguistic and postcolonial frameworks, the paper argues that code-switching operates as a transformative literary practice. It enables writers to inhabit English without surrendering

indigenous linguistic identity, thereby challenging hierarchical assumptions embedded within national and global literary markets.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond regional literature. In an era of increasing globalization and linguistic standardization, the politics of language in marginalized spaces demand renewed attention. By foregrounding code-switching as resistance, this study contributes to broader debates on Indian English, decolonial aesthetics, and the dynamic interplay between language and power. It proposes that linguistic hybridity in Northeast Indian fiction should not be interpreted as deviation from normative English but as deliberate reconfiguration an act that redefines both the boundaries of literary language and the contours of postcolonial identity.

### **Literature Review**

Code-switching was initially conceptualized within sociolinguistics as patterned alternation between languages within a single discourse event (Blom & Gumperz, 1972). Gumperz (1982) emphasized contextualization cues, arguing that language alternation signals shifts in social relationships and interpretive frames. Poplack (1980) examined structural constraints on code alternation, while Myers-Scotton (1993) proposed the Markedness Model, which interprets language choice as strategic negotiation of social rights and obligations. These foundational studies treated code-switching primarily as spoken interaction shaped by pragmatic considerations.

Subsequent scholarship expanded this view by situating bilingualism within broader power structures. Heller (1999) argued that code-switching is embedded within socio-economic hierarchies and institutional control, while Auer (1998) highlighted its discursive functions in identity construction. Within postcolonial contexts, linguistic hybridity has been interpreted as both resistance and negotiation (Kachru, 1986).

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) proposed that postcolonial writers “abrogate” the authority of Standard English and “appropriate” it to articulate indigenous experiences. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986), conversely, critiqued the continued use of colonial languages, advocating linguistic decolonization through indigenous tongues. Between these positions lies Bhabha’s (1994) influential concept of hybridity, which reframes colonial language as a site of subversive transformation. Hybridity produces a “third space” where dominant discourses are unsettled and new identities emerge.

Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of heteroglossia further illuminates literary multilingualism by emphasizing the coexistence of diverse speech types within narrative. Language is never singular but always dialogic, shaped by social tensions and ideological struggles.

Despite these theoretical advancements, scholarship on Northeast Indian fiction has seldom foregrounded code-switching as a central analytical category. While Misra (2014) documents the richness of the region’s literary voices, and Baruah (2005) contextualizes its political complexity, the linguistic dimension remains relatively undertheorized. This paper extends these conversations by examining how code-switching in Northeast fiction operates as aesthetic innovation and political defiance.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding of this study integrates sociolinguistic, postcolonial, and dialogic perspectives. Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistics provides tools for understanding how language alternation signals contextual meaning, while Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model elucidates the strategic dimension of code choice. These frameworks reveal that code-switching indexes identity, solidarity, and power relations.

Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity situates linguistic mixing within postcolonial resistance, conceptualizing it as a destabilizing force that unsettles colonial authority. Hybridity disrupts binary structures of domination by producing ambivalent spaces of articulation. Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia complements this approach by foregrounding multiplicity within language itself, suggesting that literary discourse is inherently dialogic.

Additionally, Spivak's (1988) interrogation of subaltern speech informs the analysis of marginalized linguistic identities. The retention of indigenous lexicons within English texts can be read as an assertion of subaltern presence within dominant narrative forms.

## Methodology

This research adopts qualitative textual analysis grounded in close reading and discourse interpretation. Selected fictional works by Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Aruni Kashyap, and Rita Chowdhury constitute the primary corpus. Rather than quantifying instances of code-switching, the study focuses on contextual meaning, examining how indigenous lexical insertions, dialogic shifts, and syntactic hybridity function within narrative structures. The emphasis lies on interpretive depth, consistent with interdisciplinary approaches that bridge linguistics and literary studies.

## Analysis and Discussion

In Mamang Dai's fiction, indigenous cosmological terms frequently remain untranslated, preserving semantic density and spiritual resonance. Such lexical insertions resist assimilation into English semantic frameworks, compelling readers to engage with unfamiliar epistemologies. Ashcroft et al. (1989) describe this strategy as appropriation, wherein colonial language is reconfigured to articulate local realities. Dai's linguistic choices create moments of productive opacity that challenge the presumed universality of English.

Temsula Ao's narratives similarly embed Ao-Naga idioms and oral rhythms within English prose. The repetition and cadence characteristic of oral storytelling introduce a heteroglossic texture that exemplifies Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism. Language becomes layered with ancestral memory, destabilizing standardized narrative authority. Code-switching here functions as cultural preservation and epistemic assertion.

Easterine Kire's fiction demonstrates how dialogic code alternation marks intimacy and communal belonging. When characters shift from English to local languages, the narrative registers emotional authenticity and cultural solidarity. Myers-Scotton (1993) argues that marked code choices index social alignment; in Kire's texts, such shifts foreground indigenous identity within national discourse.

Aruni Kashyap's work, situated within contexts of political unrest, deploys Assamese expressions and protest slogans that interrupt English narration. These insertions destabilize linguistic neutrality, embedding the narrative within localized resistance. Bhabha's (1994) hybridity becomes visible as English is unsettled from within, transformed into a contested medium rather than an authoritative one.

Rita Chowdhury's narratives further illustrate the intersection of linguistic hybridity and gendered agency. Indigenous expressions articulate emotional nuance inaccessible through English equivalents, enabling female characters to assert voice within patriarchal and colonial structures. Spivak's (1988) concern regarding subaltern speech finds partial response in such linguistic reclamation.

Across these texts, untranslatability emerges as a deliberate strategy. Venuti (1995) contends that foreignization resists cultural domestication in translation; similarly, untranslated indigenous terms resist assimilation into dominant linguistic paradigms. Code-switching thus becomes an ethical and political choice that affirms difference rather than erasing it.

### Conclusion

Code-switching in Northeast Indian fiction operates as more than a stylistic embellishment or sociolinguistic reflection. It constitutes a deliberate literary strategy that negotiates power, identity, and resistance within postcolonial contexts. By interweaving English with indigenous languages, writers from the region transform colonial language into a dialogic and hybrid medium capable of articulating marginalized experiences. Through theoretical engagement with hybridity, heteroglossia, and sociolinguistic models of code-switching, this study has demonstrated that linguistic alternation destabilizes hegemonic norms and preserves cultural specificity. The refusal to translate certain expressions challenges monolingual expectations and foregrounds epistemic plurality. Future research may incorporate corpus linguistics to trace broader patterns of hybridity across Indian English literature or comparative analyses with other postcolonial regions. Ultimately, recognizing code-switching as resistance enriches both literary criticism and sociolinguistic inquiry, underscoring the transformative potential of language in marginalized spaces.

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