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cotton college  
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*Editors:*

Abanti Barua Bharali  
Arunabha Bhuyan

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Indian English Literature experience in the context of a of literary studies in contemporary together the various strands of a kind of "creative assimilation" this issue of *Negotiations*, India area. We also decided on a special has acquired particular significance recent times.

Indian Writing in English of the Indian experience wheel historical. In the early stages, western form of the writing. They but in the garb of pure unadul because most of the readers were educated in English. In the early took over the reins of Indian and willingly introduced native terms this coterie of English writers | Orwell and a few others. Raja were among the few native writers themselves in this period itself.

The late seventies saw a background. Salman Rushdie, V Chaudhury and others who set Rushdie's *Midnight Children* in 2008 Arundhati Roy, Kiran De

## FOREWORD

Indian English Literature is a distinctive genre recording the Indian experience in the context of a multicultural, multilingual, pluralistic dimension of literary studies in contemporary times. Its uniqueness is its capacity to pull together the various strands of linguistic and cultural tradition in the country—a kind of “creative assimilation”. Therefore when it came to choosing a theme for this issue of *Negotiations*, Indian writing in English became the generally preferred area. We also decided on a special focus on the literature of the Northeast, which has acquired particular significance in the literary arena of mainstream India of recent times.

Indian Writing in English has been able to bring to the fore the whole gamut of the Indian experience whether public or private, social, cultural, political or historical. In the early stages, Indian writing in English was influenced by the western form of the writing. The writers wrote of the essentially Indian experience but in the garb of pure unadulterated English. The reason for this was probably because most of the readers were either the British themselves or the Indians educated in English. In the early years of the twentieth century when the British took over the reins of Indian administration a new breed of writers emerged who willingly introduced native terms to add to the authenticity of the context. To this coterie of English writers belonged Rudyard Kipling, Jim Corbett, George Orwell and a few others. Raja Rao, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu were among the few native writers who wrote in English and carved a niche for themselves in this period itself.

The late seventies saw a new elitist group of writers with public school background. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Amit Chaudhury and others who set a new trend in Indian writing in English. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* won the Booker in 1981 and in 1997, 2006 and 2008 Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga repeated the feat indicating

the level of excellence that our writings have achieved in the world scenario. The last few years have seen the growing popularity of a new breed of writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chetan Bhagat, Pankaj Mishra and Hari Kunzru who have captivated the interest of the new generation.

Both the colonial past and the post colonial impression have found place in the writing of the Indian writers even though it may be at times in the form of resistance. In this context one can indicate the literature from North East India which is an umbrella term for the body and work produced by writers of this part of India. Northeast writing which is as variegated as the culture and history it aims to showcase stands quite apart from mainstream Indian English Literature. The beautiful landscape, conflict and insurgency and different ethnic tribes asserting their identity – all find place in North East literature. Writers like Temsula Ao find the term Northeast India a little disturbing as it has a colonial annotation and the history, heritage and culture of the people of North East are such that they cannot be clubbed together. National journals in the last few years have shown a rise of interest in the writings from this remote eastern corner of the country.

Temsila Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin Nangaum, Esther Syiem, Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Anjum Hasan, Monalisa Changkisa, Easterine Kire and Indrani Raimedhi are some well-known writers in English from the North East. The new generation of writers in English from this corner of the country including Jahnvi Barua, Siddhartha Sarma, Aruni Kashyap and Uddipana Goswami have all grappled with issues like identity, violence, insurgency and ethnicity that have ravaged the beautiful landscape of the North East.

Though the papers in the journal demonstrate a slant towards fiction, a sizeable number of them focus on history, society, politics and gender through the genre of critical essays, poetry, drama and life writings.

Diaspora Writing is an interesting area of study providing a specific dimension to Indian English studies while recording the complex experiences of a novel ambience with nostalgia. P.Vetri Selvi's paper provides a fresh outlook in this area, when she talks about the Parsi Diasporic writers, who combine three distinct experiences in their writings, namely, the Persian past, the Indian connection and the more recent western experience.

Interdisciplinary approaches and ever – widening perspectives have greatly broadened the scope of literary narratives. Feminism, identity, marginality, conflict, self and society are areas that lend themselves to an interdisciplinary approach while focussing on the chosen thematic concerns.

Two socio-political texts *India after Gandhi* and *India from Midnight to Millennium* offering an analysis of the fate and future of the Indian Democracy have created a deep imprint in contemporary times. Garima Kalita scrutinises the politics of the Indian state with reference to these texts and the discourse of welfare and growth in her paper *Reading India after Gandhi and India from Midnight to Millennium: A Trajectory of Growth and Welfare for Guha and Tharoor*.

Integral to the variegated concerns of Indian English literature are the issues of myth, folklore, caste and rituals. Girish Karnad, the master dramatist has

explored these concerns with re Gautam Sarma's paper, *Identity* the "location of women amid existing patriarchal structures".

History has a way of re-revisiting the past. In fact, history past and the present while giving area 'History Revisited': A Reader Bhuyan and *The Spirit of a Land* Bharali assert the truth of this. (opus, in that it has brought into trade, migration of indentured labour gamut of oppression through a paper revisits the turbulent history commitment in Ghosh's powerful Chatterjee's work of fiction- *Re* the distinction of being a historian *of a land* offers a reading of it as the private and the public concerns. History, the sense of and the present, form the core of B. Nath in her paper *Negotiating Mahapatra's Poetry* takes a "po coming together of the past and of the poet's concern about the

Identity is a persistent issue in the context of the region, of G Merry B Bora and Liza Das's paper *Deshpande's: Small Remedies* identity "in relation to an issue of identity against the various "social and cultural patterns Indian milieu".

Gautam Sarma's paper *B* Indian English literature. This Indian English novel has come Booker Award scene as witness of the Indian novel is as the writer novelization of the nation at

A recurrent theme in almost always had a powerful presence earliest times. Leila Seth's life sketch Seth's *On Balance* is one such points out, concepts of patriarchy work as the first lady advocate

explored these concerns with reference to the post colonial and the contemporary. Gautam Sarma's paper, **Identity, Difference and Resistance to Meaning** explores the "location of women amidst certain social and cultural practices within the existing patriarchal structures of power and hegemony".

History has a way of reconstructing the present through the means of revisiting the past. In fact, historical fiction is a unique genre which correlates the past and the present while giving us glimpses of the future. Two papers in this area 'History Revisited': **A Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*** by Arunabha Bhuyan and **The Spirit of a land... a reading of *Rajmohan's Wife*** by Abanti B. Bharali assert the truth of this. Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* can be regarded as a magnum opus, in that it has brought into its huge canvas, the entire history of the opium trade, migration of indentured labour from the British colonies and the entire gamut of oppression through colonialism and the traditional social system. The paper revisits the turbulent history of the age and reads "the strong human commitment in Ghosh's powerful fictionalization of this history." Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's work of fiction- *Rajmohan's Wife* as the first Indian English novel has the distinction of being a historical document. The paper on it entitled *The Spirit of a land* offers a reading of it as an allegory of the nation, where the two worlds- the private and the public coalesce to bring out both traditional and contemporary concerns. History, the sense of belonging and the coming together of the past and the present, form the core of Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry. The writer Deetimali B. Nath in her paper **Negotiating the Past and present – A Reading of Jayanta Mahapatra's Poetry** takes a "postcolonial, theoretical stance", as she looks at the coming together of the past and present in Mahapatra's poetry against the backdrop of the poet's concern about the crisis of identity.

Identity is a persistent issue in most of the papers in the journal, be it in the context of the region, of gender, the socio- cultural, historical or political. Merry B Bora and Liza Das's paper: **Quest For Identity: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's: *Small Remedies*** is a narrative which explores the question of identity "in relation to an understanding of the self". The paper reads the issue of identity against the backdrop of Deshpande's novel and explores the various "social and cultural processes that go into the identity process in the Indian milieu".

Geetam Sarma's paper **Booker's India** rounds up the the discussions on Indian English literature. This is achieved through, an analytical account that the Indian English novel has come into its own, with its significant presence in the Booker Award scene as witnessed in the recent decade. The greatest contribution of the Indian novel is as the writer very perceptively puts it "we are witness to the novelization of the nation at various historical stages".

A recurrent theme in almost all the papers is the gender issue. Women have always had a powerful presence in Indian English writing beginning with the earliest times. Leila Seth's life sketch **Multiple Negotiations – A Reading of Leila Seth's *On Balance*** is one such narrative, where as the writer Kalpana B. Barman points out, concepts of patriarchy is interrogated and challenged through her work as the first lady advocate of the Supreme Court of India. Seth's attempts to

'carve a niche' for herself is perhaps greatly significant because it occurred at a time when such attempts were unheard of.

The geographically distant Northeastern part of India "Shrouded in an impenetrable mist is no longer a mysterious place, now more so with the flow of literature from this part of the world". The strong focus of this region has been our endeavour, resulting in the spate of articles relating to identity issues, politics conflict and culture, making this an important category of the journal. Most of the papers dealing with the Northeast, have explored various dimensions with emphasis on creative writings from this culturally diverse area.

The section on Northeastern writings gets an impetus with a narrative by Siddhartha Sarma, the award winning young writer from this region whose paper **Historical Fiction from the Northeast : Methods, Practices, Advantages and Pitfalls** is a significant study. This paper examines a need for creating more works of historical fiction from the Northeast, as it looks at the use of unique tools and traditions of this area, which aids the writer in forging his/her art.

The politics of representation and marginalization is at the core of Prasanta Das's incisive analysis of three 'Shillong Poets': Desmond Kharmawplang, Robin Ngangom and Kynpham Sing Nongkynri. He identifies the powerful political aura in their poetry which gives them a sense of being 'rooted' in their particular contemporary situations. As Northerners emphasizing their regional identities, they appear as 'Regional versifiers' though they are "arguably more global".

Northeast, culturally rich and ethnically diverse is a land of myth, magic and folklore. An interesting study of folk tales, in fact a re-reading of them, in order to unearth hidden meanings relating to disturbing issues of society, forms the core of the paper **Prescribed/Proscribed: Folk Tales from the Northeast** by Santanu Phukan.

Among the literatures of the north eastern region, Assamese literature is one of the richest and most distinctive strands of regional writings in India. The names of Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Arun Sarma can be singled out as being the most distinguished and popular names in Assamese literature. Stuti Goswami's paper **Conflict in the Short Stories of Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia—A Selective Reading** explores the conflict and dilemma of human circumstances through an analysis of two of Dr. Saikia's short stories *Gohbor* and *Shringbol*. Namrata Pathak's Paper on **Arun Sarma's Plays: 'Performing the Self'** on the other hand is a incisive study of a number of Sarma's plays based on theoretical concepts of the self, subject position, empowerment, role remake etc which focuses on the writer's concern about the crisis of identity and the self. Arun Sarma's calibre as a playwright of great intellectual and social merit emerges from this narrative. Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi, poet and lyricist par excellence, is another great name in Assamese literature. Her seminal contribution to the growth of Assamese poetry is yet to receive the treatment it deserves. The paper **Nirmalprabha Bordoloi: Poetry and the Spiritual Quest** by Dhrubajyoti Das underlines her poetic quest and focusses on the spiritual imperative as reflected through parameters such as nature, love, life and death.

Papers dealing with politics of identity, belonging insurgency. These sensitive paper, **Locating Identities Politics of Belonging in N** shifting identities in a mult Assamese tribal relations w distinct ethnic entity.

Women have always b have formed core issues in t not a coincidence that wor from the Northeast. Prabali writers from the Northeast **Voices from the Northeast**

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This issue of the jour of **Recent Writings from ?** from this part of the cc Commonwealth Award. Th significant recent writings kindling of interests in the region and creating an awa the country".

Articles in this volum and the woman-centric tex widened to include fiction narrative and narratives of i much on summarization or the cultural, political or ps text. It has been our endea English and with the unsti journey of **Negotiations fo**

Papers dealing with the literature from the Northeast have explored the politics of identity, belonging and otherness against the backdrop of conflict and insurgency. These sensitive and contentious issues are part of Rakhee K. Moral's paper, *Locating Identities and Otherness: Conflict, Representation and the Politics of Belonging in North East India* which deals with the "problematic of shifting identities in a multicultural Assamese society". The paper also talks about Assamese tribal relations with specific reference to the Karbi people's claims for a distinct ethnic entity.

Women have always been at the helm in the Northeast and gender concerns have formed core issues in the literature emanating from this region. It is perhaps not a coincidence that women writer's have emerged as a dominant voice (force) from the Northeast. Prabalika Sarma analyses the writings of a number of women writers from the Northeast in a general overview of their writings in her paper *Voices from the Northeast*.

A departure from the other papers is the narrative on language and linguistics—*The Sphota Theory in Indian Grammatical Tradition and the Notion of Language Faculty in the Generative Paradigm: An Introspection*.

This issue of the journal also carries a postscript *Lifting the Veil – Impact of Recent Writings from Northeast India* by Jahnabi Barua, an eminent writer from this part of the country shortlisted for the Man Booker and the Commonwealth Award. The article purports to give an overview of the impact of significant recent writings from the Northeast. The narrative articulates the kindling of interests in the Northeast generated by the spate of writings from the region and creating an awareness of the land and people not "unlike the rest of the country".

Articles in this volume are a response to literary, socio-cultural, historical and the woman-centric texts as well as the art of narrative. Generic horizon is widened to include fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, life-writing, folktale narrative and narratives of conflict. Our emphasis in the journal has not been so much on summarization or a critical analysis of the texts concerned but rather on the cultural, political or psychological conditions that help produce or write a text. It has been our endeavour to address the core issues of Indian writing in English and with the unstinted support of our colleagues we hope to carry the journey of *Negotiations* forward...

Abanti Barua Bharali  
Arunabha Bhuyan



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THE SPIRIT OF A LAND...  
**RAJMOHAN'S WIFE – THE FIRST INDIAN  
ENGLISH NOVEL**

*Abanti Barua Bharali*

**ABSTRACT.** *The history of India in the nineteenth century was a story of a land in ferment, of an age of conflict and contradiction, a new era overlapping into the old. Against this backdrop, emerged the founder of Indian nationalism, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the master storyteller whose first novel and the only one in English, Rajmohan's Wife unwittingly turned into a historical document. This paper explores the novel as a work where the personal and the political integrate to form a compelling and challenging work of fiction.*

*Keywords:* colonization, representation, national allegory, womanhood, tradition, emerging society, culture, conglomeration.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's novel *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first published novel in English by an Indian. Apart from this, the novel's importance lies in the fact that it marked Bankimchandra's debut as a novelist. It is interesting to note that this first Indian novel in English was for well over a century more heard of than read, for this early fictional work of the great novelist got overshadowed by the fourteen novels he wrote in Bengali like *Durgesh Nandini* (1865) and *Anandamath* (1882) etc.

However, the idea of taking up this text for discussion apart from its historical importance as 'Asia's first English novel' is as Meenakshi Mukherjee, the editor of the recent reprinted edition says "a potent site for discussing crucial questions about language, culture colonization and representation". (*Rajmohan's Wife: Afterword*) Literary critic Makarand Paranjpe believes that this novel can be "read as a sort of national allegory".

Bankimchandra is regarded as one of the creators of Indian nationalism who used devices such as allegory and personification extensively to convey his ideas. Though the pronounced nationalism of *Anandamath* belongs to a

later phase of Bankim's career, its beginnings maybe found in *Rajmohan's Wife*.

It is a most important and interesting fact to note that though the characters are portrayed as individuals, yet they become more important in their collective embodiment as representations of social conditions and ideological states. This argument of Paranjpe is substantiated by the fact that the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of intense cultural reformation, as also a period which saw the Indian society on the verge of changes and upheavals as a result of exposure to western ideas.

At the centre of the thematic, cultural, spiritual and historical aspects of the novel is the character of Matangini or Rajmohan's wife. She has been described in the opening pages of the novel as an eighteen year old who is a "perfect flower of beauty" (3). The portrait of Matangini is a combination of the old and the new. In her, Bankim presents an entirely new kind of woman who stand out defying the stereotypical image of womanhood as timid, weak and cloying; she is Bankim's new Indian woman: strong, spirited, courageous and energetic. Though her life is hazardous, difficult and tragic, she is undefeatable. Matangini can be identified as the 'spirit or personification of new India, an emergent modern country coming out from the darkness of the medieval and feudal age, but an India burdened by sorrow and anxiety.

In a sense, Matangini is a transgressive heroine for she crosses the threshold though she has been forbidden to go out to 'draw water' by her husband; showing herself to other men particularly her brother-in-law Madhav. Bankim is realistic enough to bring in the instance of breaking the 'law of the threshold' and marks Matangini's 'step over the bar' and the fact that once having done so, she can never return to her designated place in life (her traditionally defined world). Matangini is characterized by her energy, adventurousness, unwillingness to be tradition-bound; the embodiment of the restlessness, vitality and energy of an emerging society.

As an early novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* is not regarded as one of Bankimchandra's better novels (his mature genius is said to have emerged after he started writing in Bengali). In fact, this novel is the most neglected among the writer's work, not even included in many collections of his work. The novel discusses issues which not only pinpoint the socio-cultural features of the time but also certain features which strike the reader as startlingly contemporary. The relation between Rajmohan and his wife Matangini is one of these. Unhappiness in the marital state, particularly for women, was a common enough theme in the novels of the time (19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century), yet it is Matangini's defiance and her going out to seek and help her lover is what stands out as unusual for its time. There is no placid, docile acceptability on the part of Matangini. When Rajmohan, her husband, demands of Matangini with typical patriarchal arrogance of the day with the words, "With whose permission did you go out?" (12) Matangini replies fearlessly, "With nobody's permission" (12) here is a deep sense of dignity and courage when she replies to her husband's charge as to why she had ventured into the public

sphere, in these bold, dignified nothing wrong in it." (12)

In Matangini, we detect English novel; as also the beginning of the later great novels of Bankimchandra a certain complexity which she means to satisfy (fulfil) her self. Matangini, at the hands of her husband, shows deviations from the norm. Bankim acknowledges that the time is a decaying one. At the same time, Matangini and Madhav, the couple within marriage and the modern wedlock. It is in these areas of transition that she is placed in the dominant position that we discern Bankim's power.

Bankimchandra writing during the days of colonial rule in India, is seen as an allegory of modern India to map out the Indian society's complex of social, ideological, and political issues through the persona of Matangini, showing a glimmer of hope in a realistic closure of opinions is at the end. Matangini in whom Bankim sees 'a type of Mother India', who is 'Mataram in Anandamath' (E. V. Rieu being sent back to her father's house in *Wife*, suggest the fact that the novel is a dream. The dominant and all-powerful force for the rise of a free and modern India.

The clash between the old and the new against the forces of tradition and modernity, echoed in the new India of colonial times, the stories are also about history and culture were shaped and defined, and lasting impact.

The transgression in Matangini's religion and fundamentalist beliefs and is made to repent and err, that the time was not ripe for such novels like *The God of Small Things* with the backdrop of traditional religion, the heart of darkness exist, and the overwhelming power of dark

sphere, in these bold, dignified tones- "I had gone because I thought there is nothing wrong in it." (12)

In Matangini, we detect the beginnings of the future heroine of the Indian English novel; as also the beginnings of the strong woman protagonists of the later great novels of Bankimchandra. Matangini's character and her situation bear a certain complexity which strikes one as distinctly modern. She cannot find the means to satisfy (fulfil) her self, her desires and aspirations. A transgressive heroine, Matangini, at the hands of her creator, remains only partially successful in her deviations from the norm. Bankimchandra, with the hindsight of the great realist, acknowledges that the time was not yet ripe to create a new society out of a decaying one. At the same time, Bankim employs in the relationship between Matangini and Madhav, the conflict between the socially sanctified form of desire within marriage and the more powerful though unsanctified passion outside wedlock. It is in these areas of the strong portrayal of a transgressive heroine who is placed in the dominant position of the prime mover of the plot of the novel that we discern Bankim's powerful women oriented novels of the future.

Bankimchandra writing his first and only English novel during the early days of colonial rule in India found himself in a dilemma. If *Rajmohan's Wife* is seen as an allegory of modern India, which Bankim was striving to create, trying to map out the Indian society of the period and divulge some meaning out of the complex of social, ideological, political and cultural conglomeration could he do it through the persona of Matangini? He resolved the crisis to some extent by showing a glimmer of hope in the rise and transgression of his heroine and the realistic closure of opinions in the tragedy and non-resolution of her life at the end. Matangini in whom Bankim seemed to be creating "the spirit of the nation, 'a type of Mother India', whom he deified so eloquently and popularly in *Bande Matarani* in *Anandamath*" (Paranjpe 152), is made to die an early death after being sent back to her father's house. This type of ending of the novel *Rajmohan's Wife*, suggest the fact that the new India that Matangini represents is still a distant dream. The dominant and all pervasive power of the colonial force is too powerful for the rise of a free and modern India.

The clash between the old and the new, as represented by Matangini's fight against the forces of traditional evil symbolized by her husband and Madhav, is echoed in the new India of contemporary times in *The God of Small Things*. Both the stories are also about history, which talks about the past and how tradition and culture were shaped and how they act upon the individual, leaving a long lasting impact.

The transgression in Matangini living in the world of medieval tradition, religion and fundamentalist culture, is not allowed full expression of her self and is made to repent and end up in oblivion. The writer realistically believes that the time was not ripe for the fruition of such beliefs. Modern Indian novels like *The God of Small Things*, talking about modernity and protest against the backdrop of traditional religion, cultural and institutionalized laws depict the heart of darkness existing in modern day India and the world. The overwhelming power of darkness in the century old novel of Bankimchandra-

significantly the first English novel by an Indian is echoed in the tragedy of the modern day novel.

The novel *Rajmohan's Wife* also opens up a host of questions and suppositions as far as language and culture is concerned. Because of the neglect suffered by this novel, we hardly know what Bankimchandra's contemporaries thought about this narrative. However, when the writer died in 1894, his younger contemporary Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghosh) wrote a series of commemorative pieces on him where he mentions the novel casually not in an encouraging manner, "To be original in an acquired language is hardly feasible and the enterprise of writing in English by an Indian is like 'speaking with a stone in the mouth or walking with stilts.'" (Induprakash 16 July-27 Aug 1894)

Many literary greats of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like Nirad C. Chowdhary thought that *Rajmohan's Wife* was only a small literary beginning- a kind of false start for Bankimchandra's literary career and has added nothing of great value to Indian fiction. Chowdhary says that Bankimchandra, creator of modern Bengali fiction, wrote his first novel in English "but found that to do so was to go into a blind alley which led nowhere." (*The Eye of the Beholder*, 1983)

However, modern critics like Prema Nandkumar do not dismiss this novel and claim that it had immediate readership all over India. This was because it was written in English and it transcended the linguistic divide. Critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee also assert that "Bankim's Bengali novels certainly influenced Indian language writers not only Bengali but through translations, writers in Hindi, Marathi and Kannada...he may be the unwitting founder of a genre that now has high visibility." (Mukherjee p.49) Similarly Ganeshwar Mishra writes, "Bankim considerably influenced the Indo-Anglian and Indian language writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century." (*The Indian Narrative Tradition and Bankim's Rajmohan's Wife* - *Journal of Literary Studies*, Vol 4 No. 1 p.59)

These modern observations and the recent reprinting with the most valuable Foreword and Afterword by the late Meenakshi Mukherjee have been a kind of rediscovery of the true worth of the novel not only as a pioneering work in a new genre but also as a harbinger of a tradition of writing that had a fledging beginning in those early days of the nineteenth century. The nomenclature of this novel *Rajmohan's Wife* is significant though not unpredictable. The problems and suffering of women have been central to the novel in India since the beginning as with the European novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The relationship between individuals and the society and the code or norm dictated by society by which they were expected to live, formed the dominant mode of the fiction of those times. The tension that this kind of relationship created particularly in case of a woman formed the stuff of most novels. Social conformity, confined existence within the private, limited sphere and the construction of identity by means of her position as daughter, mother wife, or widow and in terms of her relationship with men, were the lot of women in those times. In this novel, the character of Rajmohan interests us little as he has little or no presence in the narrative; he figures only as Matangini's husband. Matangini's identity then is inextricably linked with that of her husband.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee's powerful female protagonists later Bengali novels. Characters like Kanak and Tara are dimly portrayed. How domestic servants and the foreign women have been highly successful.

Creativity apart, practicing his decision to give up writing in English as a medium, maybe to address a wider audience, to write in Bengali is your writing in English..."

Against the backdrop of the advice such as this creates an interesting situation at this time, English language and culture are not the educated class. Also large groups are attracted to the English language; however, the novel was to be taken as a declaration of a nationalistic struggle in his country. It is more appropriate for it would have faced the problem of language hiatus that exists between the chosen to express it must have been in English and choosing Bengali as the medium.

The problem of language has been a factor plaguing India since the time of Bankim, a pioneer in this field. In his own words when he said that language is like jewels. The more it is studied, the more it is appreciated. A single great idea in a language circulated among the people has more vivifying and permeating results than all our English speech. (Das 1984, 96-97) The emphasis on language and permeating the concept of 'new consciousness' (Bagchi 126). 'the moment' (Bagchi 126), 'new consciousness by interpretation of the power of language.'

Matangini anticipates the role of women who flout the accepted feminine norms of nationalism. An interesting feature of her almost demonic strength attracts the attention of the men. They come to terms with the character of the author is the first in a series of such characters.

Bankimchandra Chatterjee has been a pioneering figure in the creation of powerful female protagonists in the history of Indian writing particularly in his later Bengali novels. Comparatively, in this novel, the other women characters like Kanak and Tara are dimly drawn though their miseries as a result of social atrocities are projected. However, in the creation of low characters of the women domestic servants and the feminine bonding, cutting across class, the writer has been highly successful.

Creativity apart, practical considerations seems to have gripped Bankim in his decision to give up writing in English and instead turn to the vernacular medium, maybe to address a wider range of readers. His advice to R.C.Dutt, writer, to write in Bengali is significant in this context, "You will never live by your writing in English..."

Against the backdrop of the educational and language scenario of the times, advice such as this creates an ambivalent situation. For due to Bentinck's Act, by this time, English language and literature were fast becoming the language of the educated class. Also large groups of educated young men were hankering after the English language; however Bankim seems to have been convinced that if the novel was to be taken as a document for social change and as a weapon of the nationalistic struggle in his country, then the use of the mother tongue would be more appropriate for it would reach a wider audience. Bankim seems to have faced the problem of language versus culture. The problem that arises from the hiatus that exists between the cultural experience that is expressed and the language chosen to express it must have been a deciding factor in his opting out of English and choosing Bengali as the means of expressing his creative outpourings.

The problem of language as a barrier to reaching out to a mass readership has been a factor plaguing Indian English writers through the ages, starting with Bankim, a pioneer in this area. His feelings are expressed most eloquently in his own words when he says, "...English is a great language, it is a mine of jewels. The more it is studied, the better..." (Das 1984, 45) but he decidedly states, "A single great idea communicated to the people of Bengal in their language circulated among them in the language that alone touches their heart, vivifying and permeating the conceptions of all ranks will work out grander results than all our English speeches and preaching will ever be able to achieve..." (Das 1984, 96-97) The emphasis on the language that touches the heart, vivifying and permeating the conceptions 'suggests the foundation of a national consciousness' (Bagchi 126). Bankimchandra, who was very much 'a man of the moment' (Bagchi 126), went about trying to rouse people and society to a new consciousness by interpreting science, history and religion with the help of the power of language.

Matangini anticipates the powerful feminine portrayals of his later novels who flout the accepted feminine principles to stand up for cause of freedom and nationalism. An interesting feature of the novels of Bankim is the extraordinary, almost demonic strength attributed to his central female protagonists which help them come to terms with the crisis in their societies. Matangini, an early creation of the author is the first in a series of strong, rebellious women who is presented



most convincingly by Bankim. However she is punished and not rewarded for her transgressions because the realist in the writer apprehended the disruptive social potential of such resistance. In his later novels, he presented his women with this great strength, making them symbols of *Shakti* to crush the enemy with almost a supernatural strength.

Matangini then is a precursor of the later powerful women in Bankimchandra's novels like Kapalkundala (*Kapalkundala*) and Shanti (*Anandamath*) or Debi Choudhurani who refuse to remain mere camp followers of their husbands or merely a *sahadharmini* and emerge in heroic defense of the motherland as in resolving the crisis in their societies. "The Goddess of humanity...as the *Devi* who is the motherland...*Bande Mataram*" (Jasodhara Bagchi)

Bankimchandra's slim slender volume like its young delicate heroine is yet a powerful voice of a nation in the making, of a tentative call in an alien tongue which dreams of shaping a new destiny for her people.

#### NOTES

1. Bankimchandra Chatterjee wrote *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864. The text was serialized in *Indian Field*, a short lived journal. The present text is reprinted from the first published version dated: 1935, edited by B.N Banerjee from Calcutta. The text published by Ravi Dayal, New Delhi, 1995 is edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee with a learned Foreword and Afterword.
2. References to comments by literary greats like, Nirad C.Chowdhary, Prema Nandkumar, Sisir Kumar Das, Ganeshwar Mishra and Jasodhara Bagchi are from the article " *Rajmohan's Wife: The First Indian English Novel*" by Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Perishable Empire*.

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## READING INDIA FROM MIDN A TRAJECTORY FOR GU

**ABSTRACT.** *The judgmental within the purview of utilitarianism this is not an irrelevant conce. Indian history the notion of welfare is very often a matter of being satisfied with fulfilling certain relative conditions between the two. The concept of welfare is mostly it is GDP oriented, the study the discourses of welfare a passing years – the social, political. The two basic texts for our scrutiny after Gandhi and Shashi Tharoor to Millennium. The idea is not critical reviews; rather on a binary entity or text – the state of Indian subtexts. My emphasis, as their novel and constantly emerging enable it to offer a pervasive sup*

**Keywords:** *democracy, welfare, anomie, doxa, false needs,*

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READING *INDIA AFTER GANDHI* AND *INDIA  
FROM MIDNIGHT TO MILLENNIUM* :  
A TRAJECTORY OF GROWTH AND WELFARE  
FOR GUHA AND THAROOR

Garima Kalita

ABSTRACT. *The judgmental yardstick of well being or welfare is not necessarily within the purview of utilitarianism, though in the Indian parliamentary democracy this is not an irrelevant concern. Especially in the contextual analysis of Modern Indian history the notion of wellbeing and happiness for a person is, if not always, very often a matter of being satiated with a number of commodities or desiring and fulfilling certain relative condition, though there may not be an invariable relation between the two. The concept of growth is generally perceived on a collective level and mostly it is GDP oriented, the per capita scale subsumed underneath. In the present study the discourses of welfare and growth are tangentially read along the axes of the passing years – the social, political and economic history of post independent India. The two basic texts for our scrutiny happen to be Ramchandra Guha's epic India after Gandhi and Shashi Tharoor's brisk traversing of history, India—From Midnight to Millennium. The idea is not to offer judgmental merit or demerit on the texts as critical reviews; rather on a hindsight, these two texts are constantly stalked by a third entity or text – the state of Indian democracy that intertwines the texts with variegated subtexts. My emphasis, as theirs too has been, the fate and future of this state, hoary, novel and constantly emerging as a foundational premise for the world to see and enable it to offer a pervasive support for the billions under its titanic shadow.*

*Keywords: democracy, welfare, growth, emergency, formation of linguistic states, anomie, doxa, false needs, parliament, socialistic pattern, liberalisation of market.*

Reading and writing history presuppose a coordinate responsibility which every politically conscious person does admit and does not deny. The effectual determinate strategy of the historian may have been looked into rather obliquely at certain point of time but now that the plane of academics and research has been established to be tentatively oriented, reading has become a liberated process

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which of course admits, as we have said it earlier, a mode of responsible action.

India's emergence as a nation is undoubtedly an offshoot of the British colonial process which had overwhelming effect on the socio political and cultural scene of the contemporary times. When after years of colonial rule India acquired freedom the task of nation building was collectively undertaken by the people of India who in a newly found euphoric jubilation, offered a painstaking affiliation to the state and the political parties including the Congress awaited the infinite possibilities of bringing welfare to and realising the dreams and desires of the common people of India.

#### Democracy : Experiments in Populism and Austerity and associative Maladies-

Democracy as a political philosophy is an ideal, welcome in all canons of a civil society. That democracy is the most warranted kind of ideology or administrative device is without a doubt. But the feasibility of the concept in pragmatic state of affairs also is an issue that needs to be considered not only from a theoretical discourse but also from the perspective of pragmatic value. Regarding an appropriate implementation of the philosophic and ethical principles in the contextualized realm, it is still vague and a matter of debate whether India the socialist democratic republic exists as a realized dream. The twin perspectives of Guha and Tharoor regarding the country, as contextualized in two massive appraisals are distinct yet in contradistinction, at moments and places; maybe naturally so. On a more general level Ramachandra Guha's familiar expertise in unbiased history works as the mainstay in his book and in case of Shashi Tharoor's recognized acumen in passionate reflection, the narrative acquires unflinching support from emotive response to incidences, great and small.<sup>1</sup>

The position of India as an ethical democracy needs to be studied in connection with equality, justice and rights and in that analysis the state of democracy is highlighted in more of a prescriptive than descriptive light.

The relation of democracy, further can be assessed with the state of capitalism and then only welfare, consumerism, productivity etc can be posed in accentuation for more clarity and elaboration.<sup>2</sup> Famous welfare economist Amartya Sen in a well documented treatise *Commodities and Capabilities*, observes the conflict between utility, desire and happiness in a person's approach towards money or asset. According to him in a socially conscious or aware community the value imposed on utility can be counterproductive or suffering from what he calls 'physical condition neglect' and 'valuation neglect'.

It often is observed that the all pervading consumerism and notions of democracy tend to overlap in various degrees, states and realms. Whether consumerism is a historical necessity and capitalism tends to curb human freedom and discretion, is a valid question that needs attentive involvement on part of critics and affiliators alike. In the socio economic contexts of Indian democracy, the advent of capitalism as against the socialistic secular model of the yesteryears signifies an overall change in the life and perspective of the citizen. The forerunner of Social studies Emile Durkheim's notional term "malady of infinite aspiration"<sup>3</sup>

is a stark signifier to the cons. In the same light Marcuse's question of a moral order as precondition would definitely condition of a person in sue with the sole mode and aim f at a common pursuit. The n of welfare cannot be accepted case of the aspiring and dem interest and rational behavi against the individual choice can be necessarily discussed : of a government is analyzed.

How is capitalism relat people of today. How does ar obvious compulsions and con The fact that the emergenc balance the social prerequisite normative principles applici dictate to authoritarianism a to be conveyed so that it fe Bordieu called the doxa. As E contingent. "What appears te and choice has quite often regulations break down and : synonymous to " anomie" normlessness".<sup>7</sup> (Of course denotes a property of social : logical or illogical, and inc alienation from tradition, fa would sap the spirit of leavit

Secularism endorses a regarding religion. The fact tl country like India is a regula the Indian constitution. Do manner so as to over emphasi social situations among clan this case Shashi Tharoor's ap 'secular educational backgrou observed and retained from it to India, the larger concept, the author on the concept o than a vehicle of state."<sup>9</sup> Wi this proposals one must accc the subject is a vulnerable

is a stark signifier to the consummate needs of a human subject under capitalism. In the same light Marcuse's false needs could be elaborated.<sup>4</sup> In this regard the question of a moral order as seen by many advocates of liberalism as a necessary precondition would definitely serve some pragmatic purposes. The socio economic condition of a person in such circumstances would not obviously remain busy with the sole mode and aim for social development at the stake of sacrifice aiming at a common pursuit. The role of utilitarianism in the context of common goal of welfare cannot be accepted as the only stark signifier of well being, because the case of the aspiring and demanding individual (even after accommodating "self interest and rational behavior" in Amartya Sen's terms) has to be considered against the individual choice and "agency aspect" of his behavior. These factors can be necessarily discussed as prerequisites before the nature of the functioning of a government is analyzed.<sup>5</sup>

How is capitalism related to populism is another seminal reflection for the people of today. How does an autonomous individual tend to behave under these obvious compulsions and concerns is a relevant challenge that needs to be accepted. The fact that the emergence of a saturated state of affluence tends to counter balance the social prerequisites of an individual needs to be studied and effective normative principles applicable in these states must be dictated. This is not a dictate to authoritarianism as in a liberal state polity the voice of the people needs to be conveyed so that it forms the part of a collective unconscious or what Bordieu called the doxa. As Bourdieu observes Doxa is historically and politically contingent. "What appears to us today as self evident, as beneath consciousness and choice has quite often been the stake of struggles ..." 6 Once the social regulations break down and a state of near restless condition arrives that becomes synonymous to "anomie" what Darkheim termed as a state of relative "normlessness".<sup>7</sup> (Of course it is not a state which is psychological but which denotes a property of social structure.) Darkheim does not view the society as a-logical or illogical, and incoherent. But in some irreconcilable situations of alienation from tradition, family, clan and neighborhood the sense of modernity would sap the spirit of leaving it on the brink of a pathological condition.<sup>8</sup>

Secularism endorses a state which allows democratic ideas and practices regarding religion. The fact that the term was 'used' and at times 'abused' in a vast country like India is a regular fallout of the various interpretations of 'secular' in the Indian constitution. Do we need to endorse the term in a vaguely perceptive manner so as to over emphasise it and hence to give rise to debatable but avoidable social situations among clans, tribes, and peoples is too tenable a state. Here in this case Shashi Tharoor's approach to this hybrid term seems to emanate from a 'secular educational background and suave modernist progressiveness consciously observed and retained from insular or parochial polity. The perspective of Tharoor to India, the larger concept, is that of 'institution building' and the opinion of the author on the concept of democracy is that "democracy is an engine rather than a vehicle of state."<sup>9</sup> Without entering into any contentious situation about this proposals one must accept that social polity is what grooms us as one and the subject is a vulnerable victim to his own grooming polity. Emergency

proclaimed by Indira Gandhi, as people commented, was that the experiment of India's development as a democracy had come to an end and an era of authoritarianism had begun. (P199) Making that prophesy only a wish fulfillment, the next phase of historical truisms emerged regarding India that Mahatma's vision of India as people's power prevailed. Taking it as a pivot around which the history of modern India was surveyed or assessed, the author comments—"That vehicle stalled for a while in the Emergency of 1975—77, but it has been chugging on steadily since, a creaky, rattling rusty machine taking the Indian people noisily on into the twenty-first century." <sup>10</sup> The excuse for emergency was puerile enough as offered by Indira Gandhi, who was facing the most critical period of her political career after The Allahabad High Court verdict declaiming her parliamentary election. So for her the proclamation was necessary as the 'excesses' of Indian democracy made it imperative for the "capacity of the national government to act decisively inside the country". (p 200) Another cause that validated this kind of extreme measure was allegedly "the threat to internal stability" that supposedly "also affected production and the prospects of economic development." <sup>11</sup>

Indira's proclamation of national emergency was out and out a contentious issue and since almost in all quarters it was seen as an authoritarian stroke for the fulfillment of personal agenda, there had to be an eye wash and the apparent excuse was that the Indian democracy was geared up for a firmer and faster pace and the supra democratic administrative agency was working hard towards completion of making this myth. But as is well evident the myth was short lived.

The official history of post colonial India is deciphered by apolitical historians like Ramachandra Guha, but a covertly political person like Shashi Tharoor would observe and comment under a deeply coloured umbrella of 'humanitarian concern' <sup>12</sup> and his affiliations would not always bypass the emotive plane of national cause of a sectarian nature. Guha is a permissive author who would try to assess with authenticated arguments and in various junctures of historical moments he would in a most earnest attempt deliver an impartial objective analysis. <sup>13</sup> His well researched documentation of the history of formation of the political states and also the conflicting episode of Kashmir, including Pak occupied Kashmir tends to offer a raw slice of facts and fantasies of the people on the both sides of the frontier. <sup>14</sup>

The responsible action of nation building was undertaken by the veterans and novices alike and the public structuring was not transparent. A sort of conundrum followed. The meaning of Swaraj or self governance was tough enough and the intergovernmental forces offered divergent yet seemingly honest strategies and proposals for further growth and welfare. The Nehruvian legacy was not followed in the consequent years and in the recent history of post independence years—divisions between the followers of Sardar Patel and Nehru, the prime minister and the deputy prime minister were more than ankle deep. Ramchandra Guha painstakingly related all major incidents creating conflict and rebuttal within the government. Guha's voice is that of the concerned observer but that with a sense of self effacement that perhaps is the hall mark of a gentleman historian. In reference to this period of trouble he considers the

pungency between the two states as "the most portentous of the rift Guha considers the rift as "The minister respectively had independence." <sup>15</sup> Though the rift resurfaced after some authenticated in every bit and strength and integrity of both states and formulation of India of this iron man must be taken

A reversal or resolution of themselves. The Kashmir issue some predictable and unpredictable of history is a most incredulous speaks authentically about its elaborate manner and by proving from making explicit come a chapter on the ascension of India researched and well placed document

#### Diachronic and Synchronic I

History is linear but how and synchronic history is how condense and also elaborately perceived if the political history. A historian needs to assess with times of Indian history multiple cause effect relationship between post independence history is then prime minister of India <sup>17</sup> 1992. The fact that civil liberties rule but by decrees or ordinances concern of the day. How is it positioned as objective reality by a perspective to offer. In regards to issue, the historian in Guha offers facts of the episode. <sup>18</sup>

The factor of growth and pragmatic pictures of day to geographical opulence and culture to such studies. Of course be facts, incidents and episodes in The seriousness of their attentions of bias, personal preoccupatio

pungency between the two stalwarts, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel as "the most portentous of the cleavages" in the post Gandhian war for power. Guha considers the rift as "These two men, prime minister and deputy prime minister respectively had major differences in the first months of independence."<sup>15</sup> Though Gandhi's death seemed to make the relations even, the rift resurfaced after some time. Though the history of this chapter is authenticated in every bit and piece, the author most objectively delineates the strength and integrity of both the leaders. In the organizations of the princely states and formulation of Indian constitution, the immeasurable contributions of this iron man must be taken into account.

A reversal or resolution was prevented by the contentious persons in conflict themselves. The Kashmir issue was also a most contentious one, originating in some predictable and unpredictable historical blunders. The fact that the course of history is a most incredulous one and at times it defies definitions, perhaps speaks authentically about its nature. Guha deals with this issue in an extensively elaborate manner and by providing small details of the process of history refrains from making explicit comment on the Kashmir question.<sup>16</sup> In fact the whole chapter on the ascension of Kashmir would remain, in our analysis, the most researched and well placed document of modern India.

#### Diachronic and Synchronic History

History is linear but how does one distinguish between diachronic history and synchronic history is what matters. To read history one needs to intensely condense and also elaborately de-stretch. The meaning of this process is well perceived if the political history in the post independence era is assessed objectively. A historian needs to assess without bias and subjectivity and in case of the turbulent times of Indian history multiple factors need to be examined for finding out the cause effect relationship between states and persons. One very crucial phase of post independence history is the declaration of emergency by Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India.<sup>17</sup> The other being the demolition of Babri masjid in 1992. The fact that civil liberties were curbed and administration was run not by rule but by decrees or ordinances during emergency, was the primary matter of concern of the day. How is the same process and historical truth analysed and posited as objective reality by two disparate assessments has indeed an interesting perspective to offer. In regards to Ramjanam bhumi debate and the Babri Masjid issue, the historian in Guha commendably without bias, dives into the blatant facts of the episode.<sup>18</sup>

The factor of growth and welfare are entwined with statistical veracity and pragmatic pictures of day to day living conditions of the people. India's geographical opulence and cultural divergences should pose a mammoth challenge to such studies. Of course both the historians have traversed long terrains of facts, incidents and episodes in public and private domains for common inferences. The seriousness of their attention is reflected in the common trait of transcendence of bias, personal preoccupation and subjectivity.

One important agenda associated with historical analysis is to recreate and restructure with the aim of a reformist. A historian is also a foreseer and this exceptional capacity to observe and imbibe represented reality calls for acceptance of life and living in the most tenuous terms. The fate of India was being refurbished in the hands of the able, enthusiast, visionaries, focusing intently upon the notions of growth, stability and welfare. The newly formed democracy became the ideal site for fulfillment of the citizens ideals, both enlightened and the idle and the passive. Both the authors have looked into the avenues used in various contexts and locales by the statesmen and politicians and the administrators.

Both the works inform infinite numbers of subjects handled with mature analysis, judgmental statements and probing implementing devices. The reading of the political scenario of this "poor, large and deeply divided society" in an unbiased temperament calls for an ability which rises above interests. Both the historians have raised contentious issues like the validity of the reservation policy and the incriminate ways of its use and abuses by people who see politics as a convenient tool for meeting private interest while absolving oneself from common consequences. The wide spectrum of people's interests and concerns need to be considered under the purview of the administrative and developmental forays.

The people's interests and concerns need to be taken into consideration by the policy formulators and the planners at the administrative helm of affairs. But as always there remains the tedious irony and gap between the political will and the culpability of the implementing agency. So the notion and declared policy of growth and welfare of the masses still retains its most elusive garb. What ails the Indian democracy is notably observed by Ramchandra Guha elsewhere, in a newspaper article (The Telegraph, 3 December, 2011) titled, "Degrading Democracy", when he writes citing a much quoted reference to the comparison between Anna Hazare's movement and the uprising at the Tahrir Square in Egypt, "Ironically, as the people in the Middle East struggle for their first taste of democracy, Indians are working overtime to degrade the democratic institutions that their forebears built and which have now seen us through 65 testing years of independence."

But as revealed in all detail, the years of the building and pioneering a nation and a country needed all the strength and tenacity and foresight for the future programmes, especially during the period of restructuring the states on the basis of language used by the majority in the region. This is a long tenuous chapter recalling to the mind every major or minor disturbances that the Govt or the Congress leaders had to confront in the long tenuous period of nation building. The problems figured in terms of giving distinct shapes to the activities accomplished in order to achieve dynamism, development and welfare of the people only recently emancipated were to be tackled. 19

*India after Gandhi* is a mammoth document subscribing to history in its minutest details and here the author has marvelled by structuring the astounding piece in a format which is both diachronic and synchronic. The chapters in the beginning are laid out in the linear fashion and the most variegated strands of historical incidents come alive like shots in succession and the critical objective

readings tend to form the n claiming a major status to unflinchingly deterrent impa and economic lives of the peo caste and "backward"ness ha of the author in these matter with this temperament and g democratic and federal setu elections and their fall out, he sketches the dynamics federal dispute between Karnataka as six ministerial meetings were solution has emerged. The D have not been totally effective. in the Pandora's box. 21 The areas of Naga insurgency, t indiscriminate corruption in delves into, a rational, auther and the author like a convi Arguments in such cases hav case of Tharoor's summary ar written by the Nehru and Gas his book, It always would be fe of some of the facts and that t situation. In "Two Assassinati up too briefly the anecdotes emergence and the end of hi uncertainty in the congress c with the idea of the "Nehr consciousness and its rationa Tharoor succinctly puts Sam poured ourselves into this sto and reinventing them. In ou power over us." (p 47, IMM) the Indian sensibility varies in never above bias.

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readings tend to form the montages.<sup>20</sup> Guha has authenticated historicity by claiming a major status to Caste and reservation politics and history. The unflinchingly deterrent impact of the Mandal Commission on the socio cultural and economic lives of the people and its most virulent emphasis on the politics of caste and "backward"ness have been read in critical terms by many. The position of the author in these matters has been ubiquitously objective to be precise and with this temperament and gaze he also delves into certain other 'rulers' in the democratic and federal setup of this country. From chapters on parliamentary elections and their fall out, he moves to the party politics in the states and veritably sketches the dynamics federalism as worked out in such topics as Cauvery Water dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the decades. More than twenty six ministerial meetings were held to solve the issue but till date no satisfactory solution has emerged. The Dictates of the Kauvery Water Dispute Tribunal too have not been totally effective. This is just one in the infinite number of composites in the Pandora's box. <sup>21</sup> The author in search of the imbroglio scampers in the areas of Naga insurgency, the uncooked broth of Kashmir and the issue of indiscriminate corruption in the political sector. In almost all the areas that he delves into, a rational, authenticated and corroborated argument is put forward and the author like a convinced arbiter uses general statements with ease. Arguments in such cases have rarely been counterproductive as it happens in case of Tharoor's summary analysis. For to take up the political history of India written by the Nehru and Gandhi family in one comparatively longer chapter for his book, It always would be forming crisp, condensed and summary generalisation of some of the facts and that too almost based on impressionistic overview of the situation. In "Two Assassinations and a Funeral" the author Shashi Tharoor sums up too briefly the anecdotes of the Indira regime followed by Rajib Gandhi's emergence and the end of his political career and the aftermath or the political uncertainty in the congress camp. What mainly emerges is the author's toying with the idea of the "Nehru Gandhi mystique" over the Indian collective consciousness and its rational and intuitive dynamics in the political scenario. Tharoor succinctly puts Saman Rushdie's observation on the subject "We have poured ourselves into this story, inventing its characters, then ripping them up and reinventing them. In our inexhaustible speculations lies one source of their power over us." (p 47, IMM) The fascination and mystique of this dynasty over the Indian sensibility varies in section to section, class to class, but the impact is never above bias.

Tharoor's observation of Nehru's legacy was a mixed one and he deciphered it as consisting of four major pillars of Indian democracy. He describes them as "democratic institution building, staunch secularism, non alignment and socialist economics." Of these four pillars, the first three are cited to be hugely beneficial for Indian people and state, but the last one is alleged to have the most detrimental effect on growth and economy. As he summarily dismisses the premise and the consequence of that policy, he comments, "the fourth was disastrous, condemning the Indian people to poverty and stagnation and engendering inefficiency, red-tapism and corruption on a scale rarely rivaled elsewhere." ( p29, IMM)



The problematic made to rise on a general level, specifically contains substantive particular facts and figures and a historian need to place them at specific locales in order to analyse or generalise. But Tharoor's book spares specificities broadly and offers general discursive notions on issues and topics. In "Of Indians and Other Minorities" the author problematises the notion of majority versus minority. He does not do so by emphasizing the conventional typical caste and creed question but by bringing in stereotypes of language, religion, communalism etc placed alongside political wisdom and sectarian communalist politics. The citing of instances does not, of course negotiate very clearly with authenticity, as he is just an involved observer and emotional affiliation is in no way a guarantee for veracity of matter.

#### Self Righteous Nationalism versus Economic Growth

The contentious issue of economic growth and social welfare are too intricately linked to let them be overlooked. The author has painstakingly brought it under discussion and begins by the government's economic policy in "The Hindu Rate of Growth and other Agnostic Legacies". His contention is that the public sector and private sector divide was not intimidating in case of the early years of nation building, since the ideal was for a socialistic pattern of society and the public sector was "a compound of nationalism and idealism" (p160, IMM). But the result of such an attitude was decrease in efficiency and waste of manpower and of course less profit. As the mantra of economic profit and gain was relegated to the rear in the public sector enterprises, India lagged behind in accumulation of wealth and grew more and more motivated by "socialist mistrust of the profit motive". At the same time private entrepreneurs were discouraged from flourishing or as dissuasive measures the private business men were imposed upon with stringent regulations and restrictions. The message imparted was clear enough. The term socialism was used as a facade of non thinking and non achieving patriots who did not have a clear cut policy of development. The perspective offered by the author is clearly reflected in this comment, "It is sadly impossible to quantify the economic losses inflicted on India over four decades of entrepreneurs frittering away their energies in queuing for licenses rather than manufacturing products, paying bribes instead of hiring workers, wooing politicians instead of understanding consumers, "getting things done" through bureaucrats rather than doing things for themselves". (p 164, IMM) The reason, as he seems to qualify, that India has not been able to update its economic policy is that the stress was not on the liberal policies in regards to industry and business. But the author observes a marked change in the Indian economy after Dr Monmohan Singh was appointed the finance minister in Narasimha Rao's cabinet in the centre. "Together they embarked on an immediate series of dramatic reforms."

The discourse of growth and welfare contextualised against the backdrop of post independent Indian history cannot be a prompt assessment, as forces of socio political and economic axes coordinate and bifurcate in various ways so as to lead consequences to contradictory fallouts. But in this regard no pretext is

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culpable enough before the democratic ideology and concomitant social agenda. It is a fact that economic liberalisation in India is beset with both advantages and disadvantages and the problem needs to be studied in a thoroughly unbiased assessment. The public private debate is a necessary one at least to point out the biased perspectives with which public enterprises are kept on the subsidy and bailout balance even if it is an accepted premise that "the public sector companies are essentially holding hostage more than half the industrial capital at India's disposal." (p 187 IMM) 22 In a conclusive statement Shashi Tharoor reasons out the nature of slackness in India's growth as the hesitant Indian economy failing to open up against world economy and citing a Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs, the author argues for the benefits "of increased trade and foreign investment." (P198 IMM)

As against the crisp fast narration of history in Shashi Tharoor's book Ramachandra Guha is elaborate and detailed in treatment. Hundreds of topics have been broached and so faithfully the historian in him is committed to truth and fact that in an astonishing veracity the subject is dealt with and that too with authentication and detailed documentation. The pace is easeful and calm with objectivity at its core. Take for instance the chapter on Emergency in 1995 which is titled "Autumn of the Matriarch". The topic takes into consideration the political forces and incidents leading to the imposition of emergency by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the eventful decline of democratic forum and forces under the dictatorial regime of an autocratic representative of the people. It also calls into question the credibility of the oppositions and the excesses done in this abnormal political tenure. He analyses the pre emergency eventualities giving rise to the Time and the post emergency Janata reign and the historical blunders that those somnolent leaders of the people were prone to do. Though the regime of Indira Gandhi during emergency was no facade for democracy, the leaders of the opposition too had no real affiliation for democratic agenda and real welfare of the common people. What they were more interested in was the agenda of revenge and retribution against Indira Gandhi than the revival of democracy and uplift of the country and society .23

Moving along the linear axis, Ramchandra Guha proceeds from Gandhi's death towards the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What is projected before us is a plethora of images of persons, political leaders, common people and incidents and anecdotes –forming the history of modern India. Bringing into specific focus, the trauma of partition, the formation of Indian states into linguistic lines, ascension of Kashmir to Indian union, the related events and thoughts, the state of emergency declared, Babri Masjid debacle, extermination of Sikh insurgency, Operation Bluestar and other major and minor histories, the author transcribes the massive montage into realized perception of the Reader. The structure of the narrative shifts between linear (developmental) and incidental (in depth) discourse as the events and incidents demand.

The relatively briefer narrative of Tharoor posed against the elaborate treatment of facts and figures in Guha in a quantifiable manner points towards dynamics of historical forces working together in linear and tangential trajectories

in India. Of course it is always difficult to arrive at a stance which in an unbiased way describes state, incidence and fate of people.

At the end of it all, the contention remains, as to how does reading of history reflect upon the past and the present and determine the future? The answer to this question seems to be more complicated than one could ever imagine. As our thoughts and philosophies tend to interact on the tangents of pragmatic history, more often than not, we seem to suffer from a sense of limitation. Confronting history, incidents and anecdotes, the reader in fact reads what is most apparent, shaped and chiseled and what is being made. The state of becoming, the state which is fluid and nascent or even shimmery, needs the maturity of time to give specific contours to and be what it becomes.

#### Notes and References :

1. The present study does not boast of a comprehensive analysis of Indian democracy, not even within the parameters of growth and welfare, two tangentially overlapping concepts in economics and sociology. What I have proposed to read here are very slight responses in the light of comparative and intertextual axes, the readings of two ambitious texts by Ramachandra Guha and Shashi Tharoor. The political stances of the authors are evidently different, as is clear from their declared credentials.
2. In "A Moral Case for Socialism" Kai Nielsen argues for the validity of competition in pure capitalism and the power of people in democratic socialism. See, p300 in *Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, Prentice-Hall, 2008.
3. Though Durkheim never actually used the word normlessness, by the word "anomie", he used to denote a state which he describes as "a rule that is a lack of rule". The term is used in his vastly influential book *Suicide* and also in *The Division of Labour in Society*.
4. Herbert Marcuse's brilliant observation regarding the social behavior of a person within the realm of the modern industrial society is, definitely a starting point in the fluid dynamics between the consumer and the typical circular progression of his needs which he calls false needs. He defines them as "those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice." Cf *One Dimensional Man*, (1964), 1991, Routledge, p7.
5. Cf *Commodities and Capabilities*, 1987, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, p
6. Bourdieu's social thesis and analysis of the functions of forces need to be read with its political dilations that categorically affect the social behavior. His notion of doxa is not a primitivisation of history but a relevant correlative to the futuristic agenda of the society. The notion of growth and welfare is not irrelevant to it. 'Doxa consists of embodied and practical understandings and know how, not mechanical reflexes'. See *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, 2004, Blackwell, Oxford, p100
7. According to Durkheim for a society to hold together needs two kinds of forces, e.g. mechanical and organic and the social integration in a modern society is much different from now for social solidarity normative regulation development of a colle
8. Freud, the master psyche thanatos or a desublimation exhilaration is a sub-capitalism virtually life
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is much different from earlier societies. Organic interdependence is necessary now for social solidarity as the society has become more complex and insufficient normative regulation cannot hold it together. What is now needed is the development of a collective conscience.

8. Freud, the master psychoanalyst would have called this kind of a state as a repressed thanatos or a desublimation of libido. The state of social chaos and extreme exhilaration is a substitute for pervasive social depression. The state of late capitalism virtually lifts man to such anorexia of spirit.
9. cf Chapter 8 . p199 (IMM)
10. cf Chapter 8 "Better Fed than Free", The Emergency and Other Urgencies p.199 (IMM)
11. That the state of emergency was declared by an elected representative of the people in a democracy speaks profusely about the political ambition of the person and the coercive manner in which authoritarianism is indulged. Apart from the communal disparity and violence, perhaps this is the darkest hour of democracy in India.
12. That his book is not a survey of Indian history is admitted at the outset by Tharoor himself. He would rather call his attempt to touch "upon many of the principal events of the last five decades. It is not 'reportage' though I do draw anecdotally upon my own my own travels and conversations in India. It is instead a subjective account, I hope both informed and impassioned, of the forces that have made ( ) today's India..."p4
13. In the chapter "The Biggest Gamble in History " Guha elaborates upon the pangs and problems of nation building, especially the hazardous task of reformulation of Indian states. As has been indicated, perhaps the most challenging task in modern history was being undertaken. He also recounts the massive preparedness for the first general election necessitated after independence in 1952.
14. On the eve of India's taking the question of Kashmir to the United Nations and even after series of discussions taking place, no mutual solution emerged. After the battle of Poonch, Dras and Kargil the domination of Indian army prevailed in Kashmir save for the North western part. Mahammad Abdullah and his National conference took the onus for standing for India.
15. See "The Biggest Gamble in History" in *India after Gandhi*, p137.
16. The controversy over Kashmir with Pakistan remains a deep rooted wound and till date oft and on, injuries are being inflicted by the jehadi and extremist groups making the situation volatile.
17. Like Kashmir, the years of black emergency still evoke debates, apathy and exhaustion and also concern.
18. In the chapter called "Riots" Guha coalesces the riot against the Sikhs, Muslims and also the Hindu communities at various points of history. What he stresses is the innocent killings of the people no way related to the trouble and the miserable plight of the law and order situation in the locales affected. It is always difficult to trace the source of an incident that becomes provocative. It was true of the Godhra mishap, Ahmedabad and Baroda killings and other similar episodes.

19. The conspicuous problems that surfaced and were sighted in regards to smooth functioning of the administrative policies were many. In fact language movements that erupted in Telegu speaking areas, Punjabi dominated and Marathi speaking areas created much of havoc to the Nehru ministry. Bilateral relations with USA were not up to mark and almost sour.
20. The author narrates linear history almost chronologically, taking various paradigms like political administration, social polity up to the end of Rajib Gandhi's rule. After this he takes up variegated issues and traverses over time through these windows.
21. Apart from the dichotomies in the reservation policy of the state and government, other major areas of contention were rampant corruption in the public and administrative and also civic departments, unequal distribution of wealth and the perennial problem of poverty, along with the strategic partnership with the world powers etc.
22. Though virulent criticism was on against international protectionism and internal controls in India, a clear policy was yet to be adopted. "The Hindu Rate of Growth" was a miserable 3.5 in the first three decades, whereas other countries in South East Asia had 8 to 15 percent growth. Cf p166, Tharoor, IMM.
23. On this phase of history, a massive number of documents are available, many of which are used by the author for a true reflection of events. Since it was a time of strife for the liberty of individual and also freedom of national press, divergent governmental versions were readily available which at moments confused the foreign press.

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## HISTORY REVI GHO

**ABSTRACT.** *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh which was shortlisted India of the 1830s as the background of diverse backgrounds who are transported to Mauritius history within the framework of human commitment.

**Keywords:** *history na border*

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Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* trilogy", which has North around the Opium War. I War between Britain and been engrossed in amassin on the bank of the Ganges population. The peasants plantation in their fertile them throughout the year. them because their fields w (*Sea of Poppies*: 29) and wer who were, in their own tu

## HISTORY REVISITED: A READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

Arunabha Bhuyan

**ABSTRACT.** *Sea of Poppies* (2008), a novel by the eminent Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 has the opium-ridden India of the 1830s as the background. The story revolves around a cast of characters of diverse backgrounds who are caught in the quagmire of this devastating opium trade and transported to Mauritius on the schooner *Ibis*. This paper attempts to relocate history within the framework of this storyline and also bring to fore Ghosh's strong human commitment.

**Keywords:** history narrative culture identity economy multiplicity dislocation border

*"The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Decti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream..." (Sea of Poppies)*

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) the first volume of a projected "Ibis trilogy", which has North India and the Bay of Bengal as the backdrop, revolves around the Opium War. In fact the novel is set in 1838 just before the Opium War between Britain and China. The East India Company had at that period been engrossed in amassing wealth of unlimited proportions by growing opium on the bank of the Ganges and exporting them to a somewhat reluctant Chinese population. The peasants of Bengal and Bihar were forced to turn to opium plantation in their fertile land in place of the regular crops that would sustain them throughout the year. The result was poverty, starvation and addiction for them because their fields were filled with no other crop but "a river of poppies." (*Sea of Poppies*: 29) and were at the disposal of the moneylenders and land owners who were, in their own turn, compelled to act at the behest of the East India

officials. The Chinese, on the other hand, were enraged at their eroding economy because this trade was guilty of turning many of their men into addicts, and offered stiff resistance. The Chinese government tried to restrict trading with Europeans and confined them to ports like Canton and Shanghai. The British transported the opium grown in India to China in return for silver, tea and silks. The Chinese government was somewhat disturbed with their loss of silver but more alarmed with the consumption of opium by their own population. But they failed to curb this trade altogether. "In 1839 the Chinese government sent a commissioner to Canton, who burnt some 20,000 chests of British-supplied opium there, and then banned all further trade with Britain. This led to war between China and Britain" (Fry 1994: 259)

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, a remarkable saga, exposes the dehumanizing effect of the opium trade on those who were directly or indirectly involved in it. This drug destroys not only the taker but also those who are intertwined with him. The process of addiction is a cyclic one—a user takes resort to opium to ease out the damaging effect of the same substance. The British in trying to override the restrictions on the Free Trade policy of the Chinese played a definite role in the ensuing Opium Wars. How the British had actually destroyed the rural/social economy has been illustrated by Ghosh here. Along with history, culture and identity are also part of this narrative. This was because of his belief in the commonalities that ran across them.

Ghosh's earlier novels have often defied borders (a recurrent theme in his novels) and his characters are shown shifting from one country to another like Burma, Cambodia, Egypt, England, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), United States, Sri Lanka and so on. There were some like Tridib and Ila in *The Shadow Lines* who did not seem to belong anywhere. In *Sea of Poppies* too the Ibis (the ship) stands as multicultural and multilingual symbol where people of different faiths, nationalities, castes and creeds from different corners of the world assemble—a British captain, an American sailor, Zachary, born of a white father and a black mother who prefers to hide his origin as the stigma of colour never leaves him, Ah Fatt a filthy opium addict who is a product of a Parsi and Chinese parenthood, a number of armed sepoy engaged to maintain order, lascars and passengers like the bankrupt and deported Raja Neel Ratan who is sentenced to work as a indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius after a false trial, Pauline the daughter of a French botanist brought up by a Bengali wet-nurse, Jodu her foster brother, Deeti the widow from eastern Bihar who had lost her husband to addiction and is now married to Kalua the low-caste, Baboo Nob Kissin an agent of Benjamin Burnham the notorious and unethical merchant—quite a motley cast of characters, almost like Chaucer's pilgrims and each with a personal history of their own. The Ibis a schooner that had earlier carried slaves, was now used to transfer 'girmityas' or indentured labourers to Mareech Islands (Mauritius). All the characters mentioned above are brought to Calcutta and finally sent out to the 'black sea' (kalapani). The Ibis like Calcutta is a shelter of polyglot communities and Ghosh wallows in the multilingual interaction of his British, Indian, French and the Lascari characters. As one reads through the

pages one finds the flexibility. The Lascars have been sailed as to which country is real

Ghosh meanwhile narrates escaping from the fate of a Frenchwoman who desires many other such intertwined Culler has shown that this the oppressed, in stories of situations as intolerable." (backgrounds, religious beliefs and Deeti need to cross to assume new identities, the Zamindari system of Bengal the sea. However, one feels necessity. Impersonation of yourself equal of any champion postcolonial text invariably difference become central" among the unfamiliar ones: from their own, the ship 'jahaj-bhais' (ship-brothers) time as men and women of this is Ghosh's way of doing

The novel begins with villages of eastern Bihar. opium has certainly invaded death of her husband Hu opium factory at Ghazipur drugged with opium on his brother-in-law could counter appalling effects of the 'op widows like Deeti are four uphold the tradition of sati caste by birth, but a man could marry her. Chivalry after marriage is socially unacceptable of Deeti they become indentured India, namely, the opium and the transportation of the plantations in island presented in this novel

The stories of these people a great narrative of history themselves new names and

pages one finds the flexibility of language in such circumstances rather fascinating. The Lascars have been sailing from such a young age that they are at times clueless as to which country is really their own. The sea is in fact their own 'land'.

Ghosh meanwhile narrates the background of all these characters—a widow escaping from the fate of a sati, a court case involving a Zamindar, the plight of a Frenchwoman who desires to escape from the rigid confines of a British home and many other such intertwining stories form a major part of the narrative. Jonathan Culler has shown that this pattern of narratives often "expose the predicaments of the oppressed, in stories that invite readers, through identification, to see certain situations as intolerable." (Culler 1997: 93-94) These are the people of diverse backgrounds, religious beliefs and also nations. Some of the characters like Paulette and Deeti need to cross the sea to escape the trying circumstances at home and assume new identities, whereas, the convicts like the Rajah (a symbol of the dying Zamindari system of Bengal) are being transported to an unknown future across the sea. However, one feels that Paulette acts more out of impulse than out of necessity. Impersonation of Paulette makes Zachary comment: "You have proved yourself equal of any chameleon" (*Sea of Poppies*: 500). According to Peter Barry a postcolonial text invariably celebrates and explores "diversity, hybridity, and difference become central" (Barry 2002:197) Familiarity is gradually seen to breed among the unfamiliar ones and a tightening of the bond is witnessed. Being distanced from their own, the ship becomes their 'home' and they address each other as 'jahaj-bhais' (ship-brothers). Social and religious divisions fade out on board with time as men and women of different cultures and backgrounds converge here. And this is Ghosh's way of doing away with the borders (this time, of social differences).

The novel begins with the introduction of Deeti who lives in one of the villages of eastern Bihar. Deeti an opium grower herself is not a user but the opium has certainly invaded her family life. She enters early widowhood at the death of her husband Hukam Singh, an addict, who was a worker in a British opium factory at Ghazipur. This wretched woman realizes later that she had been drugged with opium on her wedding night by her own mother-in-law so that her brother-in-law could consummate the marriage and impregnate her. So the appalling effects of the 'opium' are shown directly in the first few pages itself. The widows like Deeti are found to be drugged and pulled towards the funeral pyre to uphold the tradition of sati. But fate had willed otherwise. It needs Kalua a low-caste by birth, but a man of great strength to carry her off from the pyre and later marry her. Chivalry after all is not a quality of merely the higher orders. The marriage is socially unacceptable and in order to escape the unrelenting in-laws of Deeti they become indentured servants on the Ibis. Two themes of 19<sup>th</sup> century India, namely, the opium cultivation of Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market and the transportation of indentured labourers by the British to be engaged in the plantations in islands like Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad are dramatically presented in this novel.

The stories of these powerless men and women have become here a part of a great narrative of history involving questions of culture and identity. They give themselves new names and identities so that they can begin their lives anew. "Cut



off from their roots, in transit, and looking ahead to a fresh start, the migrants are prone to invent new names and histories." (Chew 2008: 2 of 2) Even before sailing on the ship it is already clear that people of variant cultures must communicate and hence a common language was essential for everyday interaction and they accommodate to their needs accordingly. There are characters that evolve in a most unexpected manner. Ah Fatt, a wasted addict in the initial stages, is a reformed and renewed individual towards the end, strong enough to challenge his oppressors. This is a moving tale of the inner strength of the common people who manage to survive the oppressive forays of politics and power in their lives. Beyond this storyline what really stands out is Ghosh's strong human commitment.

The three sections of the novel, namely, 'Land', 'River' and 'Sea' show a movement from a fixed point of location to a gradual dislocation. Not only do the characters in the Ibis assume a mixed identity but the narration too follows the same pattern: "Can you imagine, dear what a prodigious stroke of kismet it will be for you to pucker Mr. Kendalbushe?...The kubber is that there's more than one young missy-mem who's got a mind to bundo the fellow." (*Sea of Poppies*: 210) These words are uttered by Mrs. Burnham a woman of English origin. Again Mr. Doughty, an Englishman, comments on the food laid out for him: "Isn't that the famous Rascally chitchky of Pollock-saug?" (*Sea of Poppies*: 118) As in Ghosh's earlier novels like *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* where Indian as well as other Asian words are profusely used, this novel too displays an exuberance of language. In fact *Sea of Poppies* is flooded with nautical jargons and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hinglish. Much to the amusement as well as amazement of the reader some Indian words are actually spelt in the manner a Sahib would pronounce it — "Balty" (baalti), "Gantas" (ghaantas), "Tancaw" (tankha), "Dufter" (daftar), "Chawbuck'd" (chabooked), "Kubber" (khabar) etc. The malleability of the Indian English is established and authenticity is also retained. Even the names of some of the principal characters are given an Anglicized touch here to leave behind a colonial taste. So Babu Nobokrishno Panda becomes Nob Kissin Baboo. The list is endless. Excessive use of Indian terms especially those of Bengali and Bhojpuri ones as well as the dialects of lascars is a little disconcerting at times to the reader but this can also be understood as the colourful lingo of the diaspora. Although diaspora indicates human displacement, in the post-colonial context it is usually "concerned with the idea of cultural dislocation contained within this term" (Gandhi 1998:131). In *Sea of Poppies* Pauline, Mr. Doughty, Nob Kissin and Zachary have all gone through the process of cultural dislocation.

One of the most heart-rending as well as vital scenes in this novel is the one where Raja Neel Ratan's forehead is tattooed with his crime, date and name of the prison. His situation is no better than an ordinary convict. He actually becomes insolvent when the opium trade fails. The very men who dined with him earlier in his boat were the ones who forcibly grabbed his land and property. This was the plight of the Indian rajas and zamindars under the British colonial rule. In fact their hold over the land loosened from the colonial period itself. The tattooist, who is sympathetic towards the plight of the Raja, puts a little opium in his mouth to relieve his pain. The opium that was responsible for his financial disaster

is now his saviour. The British here. The tattooist had dilute. What is written on you interesting turn of events the of the locals. However it is own destinies.

The novel is the first p note. After much tension, figl by Deeti, Zachary, Nob Kissi characters of the novel like I in a boat to an unknown de When the novel ends the Ib Islands. What lies in wait for way the continuity is mainta expectation for the second ve

A lot of serious research cartography but a rare comir Ghosh the socio-anthropoloq readers who are familiar w consequences of the opium tr painted a large canvas teemir land and position. Like the s position to relate their person is not placed at the centre b victims who occupy this pla colonial tirade, Amitav Ghosl British colonialism where fac merge into one narrative.

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is now his saviour. The British could not be allowed to play the role of the Almighty here. The tattooist had diluted the ink so that the marks would gradually fade out. What is written on your forehead need not always be your destiny. In an interesting turn of events the British are the 'fatalists' here trying to carve the fate of the locals. However it is the colonial victims who eventually chart out their own destinies.

The novel is the first part of a proposed trilogy and ends in an uncertain note. After much tension, fights, bloodshed on board and finally a storm, watched by Deeti, Zachary, Nob Kissin and Paulette from the deck of Ibis, few important characters of the novel like Raja Neel Ratan, Jodu, Kalua and Serang Ali escape in a boat to an unknown destination that the sea would eventually take them. When the novel ends the Ibis is still mid-sea and yet to arrive in the Mareech Islands. What lies in wait for Deeti, Paulette or the Raja we do not know. In this way the continuity is maintained by the novelist and the reader too waits with expectation for the second volume of the trilogy.

A lot of serious research is involved behind this work. This novel is not just cartography but a rare coming together of history and contemporary relevance. Ghosh the socio-anthropologist and his narration bring back a lost world to his readers who are familiar with the colonial history. To show the disastrous consequences of the opium trade on the lives of the Indian population Ghosh has painted a large canvas teeming with men and women displaced from their own land and position. Like the slave, Bomma, in *In an Antique Land*, they are in a position to relate their personal histories in their own voice. The British colonizer is not placed at the centre but it is the common underdogs, the much abused victims who occupy this place in this narration. Whether or not it is an anti-colonial tirade, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* must be regarded as another tale of British colonialism where fact and fiction have crossed their "shadow lines" to merge into one narrative.

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## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A READING OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S *SMALL REMEDIES*

Merry Baruah Bora  
Liza Das

**ABSTRACT:** *Identity remains an integral issue in relation to an understanding of the self situated in a socio-cultural locale. Given the surge of theoretical perspectives, it appears to attain a rather complex status wherein it seems no longer acceptable to regard identity as a rigid given but a construct which reflects the culture and ideology of the respective society within which it is located. Shashi Deshpande's novel Small Remedies attempts a close reading of the several social and cultural processes that go into the making of an individual's identity in relation to the Indian milieu. The paper borrows theoretical terminology from cultural studies in an attempt to analyse the novelist's perspective on identity in relation to the Indian socio-cultural realm.*

**Keywords:** *self, family, identity, culture.*

*"...we are not born with an identity, but it emerges in a number of different forms through a series of identifications which combine and emerge in an infinite number of forms so that there is never one fixed, coherent identity but several in play."*

Kath Woodward

Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* (2000) treats the issue of identity in a manner that provides a locus on the basis of which an understanding of self and family is made possible. Deshpande's portrayal of identity also seems to throw light on the cultural and social politics behind the formation of identities and reveals how "the need to characterise an individual in one particular way rather than another is rooted in the prevailing interests, perceived problems and anticipated solutions. An entire structure of values, norms and standards is constructed to guard those interests" (Kelkar and Gangavene 21). Through her

characteristic realism Deshpande's position portrayed in terms of her characters going by their breadwinners, owners and business and the profession to bear and look after child motherhood besides the i which posits the contestation and Leela recounted through their culture specific roles a the personal memory of M on the life of Savitribai, a d of the image of Leela which she is still in the process of in mind that these two wo had to experience similar prescribed roles confined w inner urge to find meaning contentment.

*Small Remedies* is also Deshpande examines the c of construction of an ind within the family and so construction of the self w cultural environment. It is inputs that significantly in take note of Schick's idea c interpreting Deshpande's through the lives of her fe

Identity is the socially complex of self signifi such collectivities as c in human behaviour: with a certain worldv same time, identity is 1 To put it more explic is (a) representation, a others, is in fact its ver

In *Small Remedies*, Le an attempt to move out o circle of oppression and ex here are shown opting for r

characteristic realism Deshpande delineates her characters and their culture specific position portrayed in terms of subjectivity, role and identity within the family. As a novelist she is acutely aware of the existing disparity in the identities of her characters going by which "men are considered to be heads of households, breadwinners, owners and managers of property, and active in politics, religion, business and the professions. Women, on the other hand are expected and trained to bear and look after children . . ." (Bhasin 7). Deshpande evokes the concept of motherhood besides the issue of an independent female identity in the novel which posits the contested issue of identity through the characters of Savitribai and Leela recounted through Madhu's vision, women belonging to diverse fields in terms of personal careers while confronting the common issue of identity within their culture specific roles and relationships. The novel works substantially through the personal memory of Madhu who is engaged in the task of writing a biography on the life of Savitribai, a doyen of classical music. There is a parallel construction of the image of Leela which is revealed once again, through Madhu's eyes while she is still in the process of writing the biography. It would be noteworthy to keep in mind that these two women belong to different times, nevertheless both have had to experience similar ordeals in their attempt to defy the traditionally prescribed roles confined within particular relationships while responding to their inner urge to find meaning in their lives through the pursuit of careers of their contentment.

*Small Remedies* is also preoccupied with familial relationships through which Deshpande examines the cultural operations that inform and reinforce the process of construction of an individual's identity with specific focus on the woman within the family and society in general. Culture plays a critical part in the construction of the self within a given familial set-up situated in a specific socio cultural environment. It is important to keep in mind the social and collective inputs that significantly influence an individual's understanding of self. One may take note of Schick's idea of identity which would also throw substantial light in interpreting Deshpande's approach to and treatment of the issue of identity through the lives of her female protagonists. Schick's remarks:

Identity is the socially constructed, socially sanctioned (or at least recognized) complex of self significations deriving from an individual's membership in such collectivities as class, race, gender, sexuality . . . [i]t plays a decisive role in human behaviour: one acts from a certain positionality and in accordance with a certain worldview or set of values deeply rooted in identity. At the same time, identity is never 'complete'; rather, it is always under construction. To put it more explicitly, identity is not an object but a *process*. . . *identity is (a) representation, and the representation of identity, whether to oneself or to others, is in fact its very construction.* (19 italics in original)

In *Small Remedies*, Leela and Savitribai are portrayed as women who make an attempt to move out of the confining enclosure of the family, resisting the circle of oppression and exploitation within the family and society. The women here are shown opting for rather unconventional careers in a manner that is quite

## ENDING OF REMEDIES

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unlike that of other women of Deshpande's novels, in that, while Savitribai chooses music as her career, Leela goes for social activism and devotes herself to the service for the underprivileged. Savitribai rejects the traditional notion of wifehood and motherhood as well in the single-minded pursuit of her musical career. Savitribai's ruthless pursuit of her career putting at stake her role of a wife and more importantly that of a mother seem to raise questions about her femininity conventionally displayed through these familial roles.

Savitribai's obsession with her profession is an all-absorbing one and leaves no space for emotions. . . Savitribai's case illustrates with great realism the truth of what Virginia Woolf has expressed in *A Room of One's Own*. There are not so many female artists primarily because women have never had the same social space or opportunity. In India, performing arts . . . at least a couple of decades ago . . . seem to subtract from the ideal of *pativrata*. (Jain 118)

Savitribai's transgression of the culturally approved role of wife and mother may be understood when one refers to Deshpande's Interview with Vanamala Viswanath, in which she observed that

It's necessary for women to live within relationships. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing. What I don't agree with is the idealisation of motherhood... (236)

Given this outlook professed by Deshpande, it becomes visible why women like Savitribai and Leela aspire to transcend the confines of narrow domesticity. However, it is not only Bai and Leela who defy the codified conduct of motherhood, there are other women in the novel who do not appear to conform to the ideal image of motherhood, one that has been so preciously upheld by Indian culture. Through Madhu's recollection of other mothers whom she had met at some point of time in her life the image of the ideal mother is refuted by Deshpande. While deliberating upon the bitterness that tainted Bai's relationship with her daughter Munni, Madhu observes

I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself, through the songs that speak of '*maa ka pyar*'. But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki's mother, stern, dictatorial and so partial to her sons; Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating; Som's mother, so demanding—none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies. (183)

*Small Remedies* attempt to project women outside of their conventional identity in allowing the women to opt for roles beyond socio-cultural impositions while they make an effort to restructure an identity which do not apparently conform to the culture specific codes.

Bai and Leela step out of straitjacketed roles, exercise their options as individuals, pursue their dreams and achieve their potential by utilizing the gifts conferred on them by nature: 'women who reached beyond

their grasp'. The novel conflicts which arose are always conditioned self. (Bhalla 76)

The societal approval evinced from the character Madhu, in the novel, realises was a clear line of demarcation they couldn't. Associating Lakshman Rekha" 218). The central image in the Indian literature deliberate on the issue of women need to constantly define their meaning to their personal lives made familiar with a woman of feminine roles and subjectivity transcending from the conventional as a woman capable of self-definition need to limit herself to roles. Leela emerges as a woman of a heroine" (94-95) by virtue of resisting the confining subjectivity in her search for fulfillment.

In reading the lives of these women created meanings of their roles and subjectivity of existence. Madhu's narrative of Bai and Leela, Bai's personal provide the plot with a horizon

. . . the many selves are in search of her destiny: widowhood... *Small Remedies* women, Bai and Leela take different course in their

Deshpande's female characters tend to codify the life of women against cultural norms. Through their emergence they emerge with a renewed sense of doubts with regard to the self as they construct themselves as constructs that satiate embedded inequalities and define a subject, socially constructed

she none the less exists of resistance and innovation

their grasp'. The novel is about women artists and creativity . . . and the conflicts which arose when the artist happened to be a woman – women are always conditioned to subdue and repress their *Aham*, their sense of self. (Bhalla 76)

The societal approval of a female musician is hard to achieve as may be evinced from the character of Bai. In the process of composing Bai's biography Madhu, in the novel, realises the challenge Bai had to confront because ". . . there was a clear line of demarcation between what females could do and what they couldn't. Associating with musicians definitely lay outside outside the Lakshman Rekha" 218). The evocation of the image of the Lakshman Rekha, a central image in the Indian socio-cultural perspective, enable Deshpande to deliberate on the issue of women perceived as inferior beings and their apparent need to constantly define themselves in relation to a superior Other which endows meaning to their personal existence and experience. In Leela too, the reader is made familiar with a woman who dared to overreach the absolutist demarcations of feminine roles and subjectivity while going for a career that necessitated her transcendence from the conventional identity of a wife or a mother. She is projected as a woman capable of selfless love and compassion and, in doing, so she does not need to limit herself to roles made available to her within marriage and family. Leela emerges as a woman who "always supported herself . . . takes on the stature of a heroine" (94-95) by virtue of her tenacity to stand by her belief in herself and resisting the confining subjective position of a woman forever in need of a man in her search for fulfillment in life.

In reading the lives of Bai and Leela one would do good to remember that these women created meaning or rather invented themselves through a realignment of their roles and subjectivities in an effort to move beyond the prescribed state of existence. Madhu's narrative which is partly informed by her memory of both Bai and Leela, Bai's personal memory and Hari's memory of Leela's life serve to provide the plot with a homogenous structure while reconciling

. . . the many selves and link Bai to Leela . . . Bai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood... *Small Remedies* is the first of Deshpande's novels to present women, Bai and Leela who break through the stereotypical mould to chart a different course in their lives. (Bhalla 85)

Deshpande's female characters reveal their unease at the dominant ideologies which tend to codify the life of a woman into strict roles conforming to the socio-cultural norms. Through the voyage of self discovery that these women undertake they emerge with a renewed vision of life and its predicaments while voicing their doubts with regard to the age-old institution of marriage and family visualizing them as constructs that satisfy culture's need to provide social sanction to the embedded inequalities and discrimination. Shashi Deshpande's female protagonist is a subject, socially constructed through discursive practices but as Weedon argues, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory

subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (125)

Seen thus, Deshpande not only succeeds in poignantly rendering the concept of identity in the context of family while illustrating the larger issue of socio-cultural politics at play making "human truths emerge and artificial constructs fall..." (in Naik 26) reasserting her belief in the individual as a human being and not mere gendered entities who become cultural templates to be inscribed upon. Such an understanding and approach towards the issue of identity problematises it further and necessitates an intense exploration and analysis of the hegemonic familial practices as well as of social and cultural systems that provide an authoritative perspective to this very crucial issue. Going back to Schick's interpretation once again may perhaps facilitate an easier understanding of identity by letting one see how it is construct first, and that there are the specificities of culture including the set of beliefs and values within that worldview which act as invisible inscriptions for the individual. Situated within such a context the individual develops his or her sense of subjectivity and an understanding of the roles and relationships in relation to the individual self as well as that of the collective experience in a particular family and the society at large. It then becomes quite clear that an attempt to define identity as a stable, uniform and complete constituent in an individual would deny the influential role played by cultural and social markers within which the individual is situated and therefore, such an approach would only provide a seemingly partial understanding. Deshpande's treatment of this very crucial issue reveals her pragmatism in acknowledging that identity is never autonomous completely: it is only definable according to what it is not [and]... is always a construction ... whether one believes one chooses one's identity for oneself, or whether this is constituted for one by one's family dynamic, philosophical considerations of identity in relation to the question of being, or by a broader socio-cultural dynamic. (Wolfreys 98)

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## BOOKER'S INDIA

Geetam Sarma

**ABSTRACT.** *The purpose of this paper is to situate a selective output of literature and make a tentative examination for any interlinking pattern, thematic or temporal, between the works chosen and the larger context of the Indian nation. The organizing perspective for this exercise is readily provided by the Booker Prize and I take up the India – related prize winning novels for a brief and summary examination.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *colonialism, racial fear, national politics, emergency, novelisation, metanarrative.*

### Literary Maps:

Commenting on the occasion of *Midnight's Children* receiving global recognition – the Booker Prize – in the year 1981, the New York Times predicted that 'the literary map of India is about to be redrawn... *Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice.' In a related but tangential context, Rukun Advani, doyen of Indian academic publishing, observed:

'...everyone knows, in the beginning there was Rushdie and the Word was with Rushdie.' (Advani, 2000 : 9)

"Within the subcontinent's literary history, Rushdie and his epic novel seem symbols of a significantly different way of experiencing life and writing about its 'post partition ontology' which really means, in the language of human beings that post-Rushdie writers had no direct or lived experience of colonialism and the national movement." (ibid)

Reverting to the observation of the New York Times – the anticipated change in the literary map of India – it was not so much redrawn, as *structurally*

*reconfigured*. In the thirty years since Indian writing in English is to creation, marketing, publishing prominent, contemporary exam recent visit to India by Jeffrey A online shopping portal includes the first place going to Chetan I Brown are the only three autho divide between the 'high' and the Writing in English.

### Encounters:

The first book in this selection is the Indian Mutiny – *The Siege* by J.G.Farrel, a Liverpool born novel with consequences, political and social. The first book (*Troubles*) is about the colonial struggle. The second book (*Mutiny in the cantonment town of Grip*) chronicles the collapse of the Japanese Empire during the Second World War India strategy with an acerbic and satirical Indian subcontinent.

"The final retreat of the British from the pantries, laundries, mufti, chandeliers and violins as well as the

And the observation of D. H. Lawrence is curiously disturbing, if not prescient.

"Perhaps by the end of his life, the people, a nation, does not seem to be shaped by other force (Farrel, 1973 :384)

Two years later the Booker Prize awarded a novel located in princely India, *The Jewel in the Crown*, by a Jewish lawyer in the city of Coimbatore in the last years of the 1930s, acquired by Jhabvala, an Indian Parsi architect who lived in Delhi for a period of around twenty years. Her major novels during the period 1950-1975. A young English woman discovers the truth about her great aunt, (C

*reconfigured*. In the thirty years since Rushdie's modern Indian epic was published, Indian writing in English is today a dynamic field of high – visibility brand creation, marketing, publishing and event –management. Two random, highly prominent, contemporary examples: the annual Jaipur Literary Festival and the recent visit to India by Jeffrey Archer on a book promotional tour. The leading online shopping portal includes seven Indian's in its list of Top 10 Authors with the first place going to Chetan Bhagat ; Paul Coelho , Sidney Sheldon and Dan Brown are the only three authors of non – Indian origin in that list. A visible divide between the 'high' and the 'popular' has emerged within the field of Indian Writing in English.

#### Encounters:

The first book in this selection is the 1973 Booker winner, a novel on the Indian Mutiny – *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Farrel, 1973). It's author, J.G.Farrel, a Liverpool born novelist of Irish descent , created a trilogy on the consequences, political and social , of colonialism, and its final violent demise . The first book (*Troubles*) is located in Ireland, a site for dramatic anti – colonial struggle. The second novel, which won the Booker, relates to the Mutiny in the cantonment town of Krishnapur, and the third (*The Singapore Grip*) chronicles the collapse of Raffle's City to the invading armies of the Japanese Empire during the Second World War. The Booker inaugurated its India strategy with an acerbic study of the first act of violent rebellion in the Indian subcontinent.

"The final retreat of the British, still doggedly stiff-upper-lipped through the pantries, laundries, music rooms and ballroom of the residency, using chandeliers and violins as weapons, is a comic delight".

And the observation of Dr McNab with which the book concludes is curiously disturbing, if not prescient:

"Perhaps by the end of his life, in 1880, he had come to believe that a people, a nation, does not create itself according to its best ideas, but is shaped by other forces, of which it has little knowledge."  
(Farrel, 1973 :384)

Two years later the Booker was awarded to *Heat and Dust* (Jhabvala, 1975), a novel located in princely India. It's author, Ruth Prawer, was the daughter of a Jewish lawyer in the city of Cologne, Germany who emigrated to Britain in the last years of the 1930s, acquired a British education and married Cyrus H. Jhabvala, an Indian Parsi architect, in 1951, where after the couple moved to Delhi for a period of around twenty years .It was here that she wrote her six major novels during the period 1955 to 1975 . *Heat and Dust* won the Booker Prize in 1975. A young English woman comes to India in the 1970s to search the truth about her great aunt, Olivia, who was a resident in the subcontinent

during the 1920s. Breaking the fetters of the social restrictions of her times, Olivia falls in love with an Indian prince, bears his child and finally aborts the baby, causing a scandal within the closed community of British society. As these truths emerge, the young woman builds an emotional bond with her aunt Olivia; falls in love with an Indian man, and comes to terms with the complexities of the subcontinent. *Heat and Dust* seems to overturn the binaries of racial fear and illicit erotic love that marked Foster's *Passage to India*, thereby, obliquely atoning for the colonial past.

#### Wanderings:

By the time *Midnight's Children* was published and received global accolades along with the Booker Prize in 1981, the nation had undergone major social and political changes – changes, severe and permanent. This history is fundamentally associated with the violent rupture in national politics caused by the imposition of the Emergency, its withdrawal, and the fractious coalitional politics of the subsequent short-lived Janata rule. In the brief space of about five years, the self-assured hegemony of the Nehruvian elite, that had directed the nation since Independence, was broken for a short spell. And, as if recording this discordant social melee, we hear Salim Sinai, offering the reader a 'chunteyified' auto-biography in an equally hybridized English language. Populous with as many characters as the Indian nation, garrulous like the people in its irreverent use of the English language, restlessly moving from Kashmir to the emerging metropolis of Bombay, seeking tempo and flavour under the ramparts of the Red Fort, in the Chandni Chowk area, cutting across to Bangladesh at the moment of its birth, returning to Old Delhi to experience the trauma of the Emergency, *Midnight's Children* is a free fall of autobiography into national history – the bravura work of an author who had written advertising copy for the global firm of Ogilvy & Mather. No other work could have stormed the market for Indian writing in English as did *Midnight's Children*; no other work could have conflated literature and performance as did Rushdie at that time. This brilliant conflation which found expression within the confines of a book, later extended into the author's life where we are witness to the first literary celebrity of the age of media: performance outstripped literature. The author leaves us with a final powerful image of the fragmentation of self:

".....it is the privilege and curse of *Midnight's Children* to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitude, and be unable to live and die in peace." (Rushdie, 1980 : 463)

So when Arundhati Roy unravels her complex tale of love, guilt, loss and redemption in *The God of Small Things* (Booker 1997), it is with this curse of the inability to live and die in peace that she contends. But Roy forsakes urbanity

to root her complex feminine and intimate drama. The *soci* family, caste and the subaltern and love are the threads of *pers*. Underwriting *The God of Small Things*, Roy never writes another novel world of literature for an activist much quoted Theses on Feuerbach than merely describing it.

#### Departures:

The next book by an Indian author is *Loss* (Desai, 2006). Set in Kanchenjunga, the novel deals with a derelict judge, his granddaughters by an ethno-nationalist urban bungalow life, forms one stray cook's son, an illegal immigrant green card. The cook's son returns with an epiphanic light of a Himalayan mountain. The story's end belongs to Sai.

"She thought of all the nights of the judge's journey, of the axis of the world."

And she felt a glimmer of hope (Desai, 2006 :323)

Departures are therefore a form of

#### Arrivals:

*The White Tiger* (Booker 2008) is a new millennium (Adiga, 2008) novel of which is departure. From the village of Balaram Halwai moves to Delhi to succeed in life, Balram murders his master, and moves to Bangalore to start a taxi company – *The White Tiger*.

*The White Tiger* has tales of arrival and departure. Identity is also linked to name. The protagonist slips from one to the other in Dhanbad, Delhi, and final arrival in Bangalore.

And it is thus that he confronts the Chinese Premier, when Balram

to root her complex feminine anguish with thick description of a very localized and intimate drama. The *social* elements in her novel are power, patriarchy, family, caste and the subaltern; cruelty, bitterness, envy, rejection, untruth and love are the threads of *personal* interaction that entwine the social elements. Underwriting *The God of Small Things* is the belief that the personal is political. Roy never writes another novel, she abandons the intimate and personalized world of literature for an activist relation to her social milieu: to paraphrase the much quoted Theses on Fierbach - it is more important to change the world than merely describing it.

#### Departures:

The next book by an Indian author to win the Booker Prize is *The Inheritance of Loss* (Desai, 2006). Set in the Himalayan foothills, in sight of Mountain Kanchenjunga, the novel deals with two worlds. The crumbling household of the derelict judge, his granddaughter Sai, her tutor and lover, and their cook, besieged by an ethno-nationalist uprising that threatens the hierarchical decorum of bungalow life, forms one strand of the narrative. The other, is the tale of the cook's son, an illegal immigrant in New York City, seeking legitimization in the green card. The cook's son returns home and is reunited with his father in the epiphanic light of a Himalayan dawn, but the words that mark the final vision at the story's end belong to Sai.

"She thought of all the National Geographics and books she had read. Of the judge's journey, of the cook's journey, of Biju's. Of the globe twirling on its axis.

And she felt a glimmer of strength. Of resolve. She must leave."  
(Desai, 2006 :323)

Departures are therefore a form of beginning.

#### Arrivals:

*The White Tiger* (Booker 2008) is a tale of mobility in the first decade of the new millennium (Adiga, 2008). Social mobility involves a set of moves, the first of which is departure. From the gritty underbelly of the mining town of Dhanbad, Balram Halwai moves to Delhi to work as a driver for a power broker. Scheming to succeed in life, Balram murders his employer, steals the slush money carried by his master, and moves to Bangalore to start his own entrepreneurial venture, a taxi company - *The White Tiger Taxi Company*.

*The White Tiger* has tales of arrivals linked to each prior departure. At the *plane of identity*, each arrival links the protagonist to a wider world of people. Identity is also linked to names - Munna, Balram, and Ashok Sharma: the protagonist slips from one to the other. Movements occur in the *plane of places* - Dhanbad, Delhi, and final arrival at Bangalore.

And it is thus that he comes to write a letter to Premier Wen Jia Bao, the Chinese Premier, when Balram comes to hear that Premier Wen is visiting

Bangalore "to know the truth about Bangalore". He exhorts the Chinese Premier not to waste money on American management books that promise Ten Secrets of Business Success and How to Become an Entrepreneur in Seven Easy Days.

"Don't waste your money on those American books", Balram writes. "They're so yesterday."

"I am tomorrow"

"When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful businessmen, you will know every thing there is to know how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured and developed in this glorious twenty – first century of man." (Adiga, 2008 :319)

From Krishnapur in the United provinces to a princely state, then, bricolage and pastiche across the sub continental Nation, resting briefly in God's own country, an encounter with ethno nationalism and inverted hierarchies in the Himalayan foothills, and finally, the location of the last Booker winning novel is the techno- city of Bangalore. In this grand sweep of characters, places and plots, we are perhaps witness to the "novelisation" of the nation at various historical stages - a meta narrative called Booker's India.

#### Notes:

- The criterion for selection is that the location of the novel is the Indian sub continent. Therefore, Naipaul's prize winning novel of 1971 is excluded, being located in Egypt, while Farrell's and Ruth Praver's novels are considered. The nationality of the author is not the basis for selection.

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## PARSI DIASPORA ROHIN

**ABSTRACT.** *Diasporic individual often leading to with identitarian conscio societies. Rohinton Mistry Zoroastrian Parsi whose putting him and his kind writers, Mistry's works are Parsi, Mistry finds himself focus on the Bombay Parsi of being both global and local. Mistry opens a window on readers. His fiction tells a book of sociology possibly*

**Keywords:** Mistry, Z

Rohinton Mistry, a most important common immigrant to Canada in Mathematics and Economic novels include *Such a Long Backdrop* of his books is to quote Hudson here:

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## PARSI DIASPORA: A DOMINANT THEME IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S WORKS

P. Vetri Selvi

**ABSTRACT.** *Diasporic existence forces loneliness and a sense of exile on the individual often leading to a severe identity crisis. Diasporic writings are suffused with identitarian consciousness and the continuing problems of living in alien societies. Rohinton Mistry, one of the preeminent writers of diaspora, is a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran putting him and his kind in diaspora in the Indian continent. Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's works are guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the Margins of Indian society, and hence his writings focus on the Bombay Parsis who have over the centuries perfected the difficult art of being both global and local at once. The contribution of writers of fiction like Mistry opens a window on Parsis in India for their Canadian and other western readers. His fiction tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of sociology possibly could.*

**Keywords:** *Mistry, Zoroastrian Parsi, diaspora, culture community.*

Rohinton Mistry, a contemporary Parsi writer, is indisputably one of the most important commonwealth writers. Born in Mumbai, India, Rohinton Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975, after obtaining an undergraduate degree in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, in 1973. His novels include *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*. The backdrop of his books is the Parsi community in Mumbai. It will be appropriate to quote Hudson here:

Every great writer, it has been well said, brings one absolutely new thing into the world – himself; and it is just because he puts this one new thing into what he writes that his work bears its own special hallmark, and has something about it which makes it unlike the work done by anyone else. (Hudson 1991: 1-2)

Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora which has come into being for political and economic motives. Diasporic existence forces loneliness and a sense of exile on the individual often leading to a severe identity crisis. His books, thus far, portray diverse facets of Indian as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs, and religion. Mistry is also a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran putting him and his kind in diaspora in the Indian continent. During India's colonized period, the Parsis were particular favourites of the British rulers. After the partition of India in 1947, some Parsis found themselves facing "the line of discontent" between the two regions. This situation provoked many departures to England and to America; marking the western diaspora of the Parsis. Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's works are guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the Margins of Indian society, and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the Hindu culture of India.

Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands. Therefore, we find most diasporic writings suffused with identitarian consciousness and the continuing problems of living in alien societies. The diasporic person is at home neither in the West nor in India and is thus 'unhomed' in the most essential sense of the term. However, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*, 'to be unhomed is not to be homeless' (Bhabha 1994:46). When the realization of being unhomed first strikes one, the world shrinks and then it expands enormously. The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.

The reality is that the immigrants experience a sense of uprootedness and unbelonging in the foreign countries. In spite of the attempts of the immigrants of acculturation, they do remain at the periphery and are treated as 'others'. The literature, product of such sensibility, foregrounds the life and experiences of this *Trishanku* community belonging to nowhere. This kind of literature presents the yearnings, anxieties, confusion and aspirations of diasporic people. In spite of the yearnings, anxieties and aspirations, not all the diasporic men are inclined to return home, but at the same time culture, customs, tradition, religions, and languages of their native lands remain and even become dearer to them. The writers, themselves, experiencing diasporic, are portraying different aspects of sensibilities and concerns, although these vary as per their generations; perceptions, attitudes and specific identities but the dominant factors are displacement, rootlessness, discrimination, marginalisation, identification, inter and cross-cultural conflicts faced by diaspora.

In the article, "Contemporary Diasporic Discourse" (Singh 2005:), Dr. Manjit Inder Singh has contributed detailed information about the complex situation of diaspora. He opines that, a new feature in diasporic imagination and human space is to find a new conversion to engage in an intellectual energy and to find a new territory or allegiance to replace a lost one and which would do away with difference and contradiction. The diasporic people also exhibit a keen desire to

assimilate and belong to their new nation. Traditional ways of life and shared concerns. But that is different in many ways and can't be absorbed into the new community, to be absorbed into the new community deserves attention is the relationship in which communities often struggle to and rites related to birth and death of the community as it struggles to re-

Rohinton Mistry's texts over centuries perfected the difficult contribution of writers of fiction for their Canadian and other immigrant community and its travails is a fiction in English on which he has written. His fiction tells us more about the relationships of the Parsis as a community on an international level by writing about them. Dodiya observes: "The Parsis write by their community. Rohinton Mistry's fiction tells us more about the existing threats to the Parsis. He presents his community through his fiction. They invariably express their concern about their community." (Dodiya 1994:10)

Mistry is very proud of his religion. His religions are influenced by his religion like the Parsis praying five times a day remind other religions have taken few years on arguing that his religion is the oldest. In the following lines. "...our prayers before your Son of God were two hundred years before Moses influenced Judaism, Christians historians also believe that the God and Satan, the soul, heaven of the innocents, resurrection, Zoroastrianism.

Parsis prefer only fair skin are dark skinned. In *A Fine B*

assimilate and belong to their present place of abode. It is a fact to remember that at some point of time the diaspora ceases to be a diaspora: it becomes part of the new nation. Traditional ways of belonging may be perceived as language, lifestyle and shared concerns. But that does not take care of the past which happens to be different in many ways and cannot be altered. Thus it needs to find a place in the new community, to be absorbed and be accepted for itself. Another aspect which deserves attention is the relationship of the individual to a community and the manner in which communities cohere through social rituals and practices. Communities often struggle to maintain an identity of their own ethnic practices and rites related to birth and burial. This aspect gets heightened in a diasporic community as it struggles to retain its distinctive features.

Rohinton Mistry's texts focus on the Bombay Parsis who have over the centuries perfected the difficult art of being both global and local at once. The contribution of writers of fiction like Mistry opens a window on Parsis in India for their Canadian and other western readers. His account of the Bombay Parsi community and its travails is the favourite subject of Mistry's Canadian-Indian fiction in English on which he concentrates in all the three fictional works of his. His fiction tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of sociology possibly could. Mistry is able to project the emotional life and personal relationships of the Parsis as a valuable part of the wider human experience at the international level by writing about these things from across the worlds. Jaydipsinh Dodiya observes: "The Parsi writers are also sensitive to the various anxieties felt by their community. Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated this in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community, and also to the country. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect their community." (Dodiya 1998: 93)

Mistry is very proud of his oldest religion and he says that all the other religions are influenced by his own. We could find many similar rituals in other religions like the Parsis praying to their God facing east like the Muslims, their tying of *Kusti* resembles the *poonal* of Hindu Brahmins, the tying and untying of this during *Kusti* prayers resemble the *sandhyavandana* prayers of the Hindus and praying five times a day reminds us of the Muslims. But according to Mistry, the other religions have taken few rituals from the age old Zoroastrianism. He goes on arguing that his religion is the oldest. He compares Christ with the Zarathustra in the following lines. "...our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?" (Mistry 1991: 28) Most religious historians also believe that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs concerning God and Satan, the soul, heaven and hell, the virgin birth of the savior, slaughter of the innocents, resurrection, the final judgment, etc. were all derived from Zoroastrianism.

Parsis prefer only fair skinned. According to them, only the low caste *ghatis* are dark skinned. In *A Fine Balance* Nusswan's wife Ruby is dismissed by her



husband's grandfather just because she is little dark in colour. This is reiterated in the *Tales from Firozsha Baag* thus: "...Parsis like light skin, and when Parsi baby is born that is the first and most important thing. If it is fair they say, O how nice light skin just like parents. But if it is dark skin they say, *arre what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah's child.*" (Mistry 1987: 46)

Each community has its own rituals especially during the times of birth, marriage, and death. Other Parsi writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Boman Desai give elaborate description of Parsi marriage ceremonies in their works but Mistry does not give a detailed description of the Parsi wedding rituals in his works. Though few weddings are portrayed like Nariman's marriage with Jasmine Contractor in *Family Matters* and Dina Dalal's marriage in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry does not elaborate on them.

Zoroastrianism, rather the Parsis who practice it, is against Inter-caste marriages. Purity, in fact, is central to the Parsi ethos. Parsis believe in keeping their race pure, and frown on intermarriage. Orthodox Parsis believe in excommunicating Parsis who marry outside of the clan. *Family Matters* charts the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism as they work their insidious way through generations of a family. In the prime of his life Nariman Vakeel was compelled by his parents and their orthodox Parsi circle to give up the woman he loved, a non-Parsi Goan, and marry the more appropriate Yasmin, a widow with two children. In the same novel the highly religious Yezad is suspicious about his son's love towards a non-Parsi girl he goes wild and he tries various dialogues to make his son fall in line with him. "...the League had discussed the 1818 case of a Parsi bigamist - married a non Parsi. "For his crime he was excommunicated by the Panchayat," said Daddy, raising his hand to signify the gravity of the punishment." (Mistry 2003: 466)

Mistry plays a double role. Though he wants to protect the dying religion of his, he is always against the orthodox Parsis and he gives a subtle remark against their purity business through Murad in *Family Matters*: "He says that perhaps the League of Orthodox Parsis could invent a Purity Detector, along the lines of the airport metal detector, which would go beep-beep-beep when an impure person walked through... I think bigotry is certainly to be laughed at." (Mistry 2003:486)

Whereas Intermarriages are not tolerated by them, Widow Remarriages are permissible in the Parsi society like that of Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* marrying Yasmin Contractor, the widowed lady with two children, and the offer for Dina Dalal, the young widow in *A Fine Balance* for a second marriage which she eventually turns down. Her brother tries to convince her thus: "Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him." (Mistry 1996:52)

Parsis are great lovers of good food. "Someone chuckled loudly that where Parsis were concerned, food was number one, conversation came second." (Mistry 1996: 38) The Parsis consume a variety of non-vegetarian food, including the Indian Hindu's sacred Cow. "Lucky for us that we are minorities in a nation of

Hindus. Let them eat th asafetida- what they call protein from their sacred

Parsis are known fe even when there are suff Psyche permits acceptan which the following inc *Family Matters* was able seventy-nine... She felt s refused to relinquish th would become a memor strength." (Mistry 2003:

Mistry portrays the sacrificing mothers. Dil portrayed in the novel as she could even conspire v creating spells for her fa and children that she suc with limes, chillies and c typical Parsi woman with her entire self to cater to in the novels of Rohinto except for Dina Dalal in under her father to the h of her brother.

Mistry is anxious al Parsi idiosyncrasies and undeserved reputation f *Family Matters* to mouth idiots, the race had de industrialists and shipbu the philanthropists who j what luster they brought

Mistry also draws tl community remaining u and women remain thus Ms. Villie in *Such a Long* the text of hundreds of a lives, looking after agein flirtations with men and concerned about this fact to the decline in Parsi po

With dwindling fig number merely at a few t — and hopefully expand

Hindus. Let them eat their pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stingy asafetida- what they call hing. Let them fart their lives away...we will get our protein from their sacred cow." (Mistry 1991: 27)

Parsis are known for their family affection. Every Parsi family is close knit even when there are sufferings, which normally humans cannot withstand. Parsi Psyche permits acceptance of sacrifice in the name of family bond, a reference to which the following incidents are quoted. From the vantage point Roxana in *Family Matters* was able to watch the scene: "...nine year-old happily feeding seventy-nine... She felt she was witnessing something almost sacred, and her eyes refused to relinquish the precious moment, for she knew instinctively that it would become a memory to cherish, to recall in difficult times when she needed strength." (Mistry 2003:113)

Mistry portrays the Parsi women to be docile beings, real homemakers and sacrificing mothers. Dilnavaz, Gustad Noble's wife in *Such a Long Journey* is portrayed in the novel as busily cooking or filling water. As a responsible mother, she could even conspire with Miss Kutpitia, the spinster in the neighbourhood in creating spells for her family's well-being. She is so concerned for her husband and children that she succumbs to Ms.Kutpitia's *jadu-mantar* and does everything with limes, chillies and even with lizard's tails. In *Family Matters*, Roxana is a typical Parsi woman with a typical Indian spirit. She loves her family and devotes her entire self to cater to their needs. Almost all the women characters portrayed in the novels of Rohinton Mistry are home lovers and are not earning members except for Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*. She moves from a protected girlhood under her father to the harsh reality of reductive femaleness under the protection of her brother.

Mistry is anxious about the Parsi youth of today. His works also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies and bloody-mindedness. Among Indians, Parsis have a not undeserved reputation for eccentricity and even testiness. He uses Dr.Fitter in *Family Matters* to mouth his opinion: "Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags, what luster they brought to our community and the nation". (Mistry 2003:51)

Mistry also draws the reader's attention to several men and women of Parsi community remaining unmarried or single even at an advanced age. Many men and women remain thus like Jal, Coomy, Daisy in *Family Matters*, Ms. Kutpitia, Ms. Villie in *Such a Long Journey*. "Mistry makes possible the introduction into the text of hundreds of ageing Parsi single women like Villie, who eke out their lives, looking after ageing parents and at times spice them with harmless little flirtations with men and gambling risks." (Bharucha 2003:183) Mistry is more concerned about this fact because remaining unmarried would further contribute to the decline in Parsi population.

With dwindling figures looming large and the latest census putting their number merely at a few thousands, Parsis have set up a fertility clinic to preserve — and hopefully expand — their community. The clinic in Mumbai Central is

the brainchild of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, a body officially inaugurated today. It is an attempt to raise awareness among Parsis, especially young couples, about the availability and necessity of fertility treatment. The seriousness of this problem is highlighted in Mistry's *Family Matters*

Every religion in the world gloats over its way of disposal of the deceased the way they like and practice. The Christians and the Muslims take pride in burying the dead and the Christians remember the dead on 2<sup>nd</sup> November every year considered as All Soul's Day. The Hindus prefer cremation. The Parsis neither bury nor cremate. They have a peculiar system of submitting the dead to the mercy of the elements by which long-necked, hairless vultures consume the flesh of the dead in an isolated spot called 'The Tower of Silence'. The remaining bones are being disposed of. This habit of the Parsis is peculiar to them and cannot be found in any other race. "The Parsi system of disposal of dead bodies is unique... They are exposed to sun's rays and are offered to birds on the same platform so that a king's corpse may lie side by side with that of a pauper. All are equal and no monument is erected to tell the glory of the great as no costly funerals or coffins distinguish the rich and the poor". (Kumar 2002:26)

Mistry expends several pages over Parsi death rites in his novels. Dinshawji's and Major Billimoria's death rites performed in the 'The Tower of Silence' as portrayed in *Such a Long Journey* is an example: "The mourners could see no more. But they knew what would happen inside: the *nassasalers* would place the body on a *pavi*, on the outermost of three concentric stone circles. Then, without touching Dinshawji's flesh, using their special hooked rods they would tear off the white cloth. Every stitch, till he was exposed to the creatures of the air, naked as the day he had entered the world." (Mistry 1991:301)

Mistry also gives some of his findings of the Parsi society like he says that Parkinsonism and Osteoporosis are prevalent diseases in the society. There is some evidence, too, that they have particularly high incidences of mental illness and haemophilia, both perhaps exacerbated by their defensiveness as a community and some degree of inbreeding. He uses Kersi in his short story to voice out his views. "That's what osteoporosis does, hollows out the bones and turns effect into cause. It has an unusually high incidence in the Parsi community, he said, but did not say why. Just one of those mysterious things. We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned". (Mistry 1987: 230)

Mistry along with some of the other Parsi diasporic writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Farokh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai has succeeded in making the minority Parsi community visible to the mainstream culture of India and to the world. As Bharucha notes in the book *Indian English Fiction 1980-1990: An Assessment*: "These texts as such are making a 'last grand stand', asserting the glorious Persian part, the Indian connection and finally the more recent western experience. This discourse also deals with the increasing tensions between the Parsi minority and the dominant section of Indian society." (Bharucha 1994:43)

Mistry's works provide authentic and scholarly insights into the Zoroastrian faith and some of its tenets. Further, it attempts to explore the distinctive character of the Parsi men of the current era in India. Rohinton Mistry entertains while he

exposes the frailties of his minority community has struggle to create its own : community is facing its ext population, brain-drain, la to the girl-child, urbaniza religion and the existence the Parsis in the recent ye and the influence of mas works of the Rohinton M

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exposes the frailties of his characters with his gentle humour. It reveals that this minority community has to cope with hegemonic forces, identity crises and the struggle to create its own space. It is hard to accept the fact that the age-old Parsi community is facing its extinction. All the concerns of the community—declining population, brain-drain, late marriages, inter-faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude to the girl-child, urbanization, alienation, modernist vs. traditionalist attitude to religion and the existence or non-existence of ethnic anxieties, marginalization of the Parsis in the recent years, dilution of values, isolation in the urban scenario and the influence of massive commercialization—are aptly delineated in the works of the Rohinton Mistry.

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## IDENTITY, DIFFERENCE AND RESISTANCE TO MEANING: LOCATING WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

Gautam Sarma

**ABSTRACT.** *Loaded as they are with concerns of contemporary import the plays of Girish Karnad articulate an absorbing discourse on issues pertaining to positions that purport to challenge hegemonic structures of identities, difference and belonging, especially in the context of postcolonial societies. In his persistent engagement with the politics of culture, power and discrimination, Karnad commiserates with the 'other' in its varied expressions of race, gender, sexuality or ethnicity and highlights the need to include this category within the 'human' confines for the sake of developing plural societies capable of accepting difference as equally integral as those in the privileged corridors. Accordingly, women, as markers of difference, come to occupy an important space in most of his works attesting thereby his patent participation in the ongoing discourse of gender. The present paper, therefore, is an attempt at reading the three plays of Karnad, viz. *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* with a view to locating the women in these plays in the course of their transformation from objects of abjection and blatant subjugation to subject identities of unambiguous reckoning.*

*Keywords:* identity, difference, resistance, meaning, location, women, patriarchy, hegemony, marginalized, postcolonialism

There is no gainsaying the fact that the plays of Girish Karnad are almost invariably informed by an intriguing medley of dramatic concerns where folklore, myth, gender, caste, race and rituals all coalesce to construct an aesthetic experience within the scaffold of a typical postcolonial concentration. For even when he seems to lean on such apparently trite and quotidian matters of exploratory concern he is prudent enough to wheedle out from within their fold issues both intellectually contentious and pertinently contemporary. Consequently, be it *Yayati*, *Tughlaq* or *Tale-danda*; *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*

or *The Fire and the Rain* tradition and ceremonial material as recognizable the extent of postcolonialism at imposing categorical distinctions, unmistakably discernible in instance, language, postcolonial sexuality and gender – in fact the business of difference is not necessarily particular to the practices of all kinds. In any power whatsoever the discourse is identical in nature and content. The representation of the postcolonial has never been a cohesive essence. Differences are articulated as against the colonial, emphatically to inform the argument: "It is the particular agency." (Gilbert and Sullivan) succinctly state:

*'Difference, which is a European practice, is a colonial analysis of empowerment. ... differences are the s*

It is the purpose of *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* the issues of identity are also included in the text positioned by the subject of hegemonic tropes of oppression to be ironically altered.

Although depicting argumentative sway is frustrated by the profusion of lower caste, privileged/noble convey the sense almost in purview of which such commonalities available structures and human re

or *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad peregrinates from ancient lore to history to tradition and ceremony to culture and politics to eventually churn out such material as recognizably constituting the postcolonial condition. Although the extent of postcolonial discourse is limitlessly vast and resists any attempt at imposing categorical boundaries, a thread of homogeneity nevertheless is unmistakably discernible in the presentation of issues and perspectives. For instance, language, politics, power, knowledge, culture, race, ritual, caste, sexuality and gender – all combine to create the postcolonial encounter. It is in fact the business of this encounter to resist all forms of oppressive structures, not necessarily pertaining to colonialism but to colonizing postures and practices of all kinds. It resists, in other words, any system of domination by any power whatsoever. This, of course, is not to say that all postcolonial discourse is identical and that there are no divergences in the treatment of its nature and content. For nothing can be more heterogeneous than the representation of the postcolonial for the simple reason that postcolonialism has never been a coherently structured category of any distinct description. In fact, it is in the underpinning of differences that it finds its sovereign essence. Differences among peoples and cultures, the local and the particular, as against the colonial practice of seeing large categories come most emphatically to inform this critical engagement. As Gilbert and Tompkins argue: "It is the particular attention to 'difference' that marks postcolonialism's agency." (Gilbert and Tompkins, 4)<sup>1</sup> And as Alan Lawson and Chris Tiffin succinctly state:

*'Difference, which in colonialist discourse connotes a remove from normative European practice, and hence function as a marker of subordination, is for post-colonial analysis the correspondent marker for identity, voice and hence empowerment. ... difference demands deference and self-location... not all differences are the same. (ibid)*

It is the purpose of this paper now to read the three plays of Karnad, viz, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala* and *The Fire and the Rain* with a view to addressing the issues of identity and difference within the context of the terms specified. Also included in the attempt is a focus on the area of meaning and resistance as posited by the subject identity. For the meaning ascribed to such identity by hegemonic tropes of oppressive centuries appears in these dramatic constructs to be ironically altered into a triumphant subversion.

Although deciphering homogenous denominators for the sake of argumentative sway is far from our purpose here, one cannot, however, help being struck by the profusion of binaries in these texts like male/female, upper caste/lower caste, privileged/marginalized, innocence/guilt, life/death etc that tends to convey the sense almost of a symbiotic pattern. The primary issues within the purview of which such binaries flourish may be widely at variance, yet the commonalities available accentuate the importance being attached to community structures and human relationships both in the matter of identity formation and

consequent power play. P. Jayalakshmi's observation with reference to two of the women characters in *The Fire and the Rain*:

*The social and cultural contexts determine their action and invite the spectators to re-orient and revise inherited opinions about them. In this, they offer immense scope for analyzing complexities and contradictions that arise in their relationship with life and society around them, since belonging to two opposing social groups or castes, they represent a resistance to a coherent meaning (Mukherjee, 254)<sup>3</sup>*

in fact, appears to apply to all the plays under consideration in varying degrees. For the contextual parameters of society and culture come to influence the construction of subject identities and the concurrent meaning they assume not only in the text specified by Jayalakshmi, but such contexts indeed serve to influence the action of the texts taken up for discussion vis-à-vis the issues envisaged. This is because Karnad seems to be primarily engaged here in these plays with the task of locating a human society torn between the 'double bind', to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak, of the brand of hegemony being perpetrated by the non-western local neo-colonial patriarchs and the imperial legacy they themselves seem to valorize. As A. Jaganmohana Chari argues:

*... the Indian psyche has been reeling under the colonial burden of the past. It is compounded of the effects of the alien rule and the oppressive ethos left over from the varnashrama dharma. What appears to be at work in consequence in the present day Indian culture and literatures weaving the webs of hegemonistic structures is an imperialism of the ruling class ideas both of the west and ancient India. (Dodiya, "Hayavadana and Nagamandala: A Study in Postcolonial Dialectics", 231)<sup>4</sup>*

The plays under discussion engage the cause of the marginalized underlining thereby the fact that the postcolonial operates from below locating itself through the lives and conditions of those underclasses, those perennially oppressed, for instance, under the gridiron of gender, race or ethnicity. Understandably, therefore, one of the central preoccupations of these plays is to address and situate the women as different from established social, cultural or institutional perceptions. Be it Padmini, Rani, Nittalai or even Vishaka; each one of them is represented with attributes that eventually succeed in resisting the accepted notions of propriety and decorum in a gender oppressed society.

It is true, of course that these women — like any average member of the group — too are presented in the beginning, in these texts, as nothing better than mere objects of repression or at their best as the somniferous other implied in the definition 'Tota mulier in utero' (Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949, translated by H M Parshley, Penguin 1972). This applies almost invariably to all the women that come to figure here regardless of their social standing in terms of class or caste. Yet, Karnad seems to see a point of advantage in presenting them

thus in that they provide difference as they grow a the narrative. For dress incompleteness, the awar awakening that marks th measures, each one of the In other words, it is in granted as they are in their to resistance through a experience.

To begin with *Hayavadana* woman as a victim of f oppressive cultural fetter feminine identity within structures. Karnad who se marital affairs states in an

*I used to know a mar-  
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was such.*

Consequently, Padm at the cost of self-respect touching everyone's feet I know that I have touched ever touched my feet. ...? only reaffirming her femi with regard to the other m fidelity. Over and over aga to bewail her predicamer stumbling over the headle out in despair:

*"Home? And what sh-  
who'll believe me? Th-  
bound to say it. Then*

The apprehensions s plight of the woman in t endure the onslaught of a affairs for anything going

thus in that they provide the substratum for him to build up the edifice of difference as they grow and stand up for change in body and mind in course of the narrative. For dressed in such a garb they serve to betray a sense of incompleteness, the awareness of which in their individual capacities leads to an awakening that marks them as different. As the narrative unfolds in progressive measures, each one of them indeed stands out as a potential instrument of change. In other words, it is in these women – oppressed, disregarded and taken for granted as they are in their initial settings – that Karnad locates the subject identities to resistance through a representation of their journey from innocence to experience.

## I

To begin with *Hayavadana* concerns itself with the transformation of the woman as a victim of patriarchal hegemony condemned to live within the oppressive cultural fetters of marriage and chastity to eventually reaffirm her feminine identity within and despite the constraints of hegemonic patriarchal structures. Karnad who sees nothing wrong in married women engaging in extra marital affairs states in an interview:

*I used to know a married woman once who positively blossomed after she had an extra-marital affair. If womanhood finds fulfilment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that be considered wrong? Radha's love for Krishna was such. (Mukherjee, 43)*

Consequently, Padmini coming from a kind of traditional background where at the cost of self-respect and much to her silent chagrin she is accustomed to touching everyone's feet in the family with no one ever reciprocating, "Do you know that I have touched everybody's feet in this family but none of them has ever touched my feet. ...?" (*Hayavadana*) she does a veritable somersault by not only reaffirming her femininity but also by responding to amoral erotic instincts with regard to the other man in her life disregarding the societal bonds of conjugal fidelity. Over and over again, we come across instances where Padmini is doomed to bewail her predicament as an object of social subjugation. For instance, on stumbling over the headless bodies of the two men in the temple of Kali, she cries out in despair:

*"Home? And what shall I say when I get there? What shall I say happened? And who'll believe me? They'll all say the two fought and died for this whore. They're bound to say it. Then what'll happen to me?" (140)*

The apprehensions so ventilated by Padmini only underscore the miserable plight of the woman in the traditional Indian society where she is destined to endure the onslaught of abusive hatred and ignominy from those at the helm of affairs for anything going awry, while the men are exonerated from any kind of



culpability. Padmini, however, emerges triumphant the moment she transforms herself from the desired object to the desiring subject showing thereby her resistance to the age old dictates of tradition and society and subverting the meaning of womanhood itself. Defying the characteristic repression common to her kind in giving vent to any kind of extra-marital desire, she articulates her passionate longing for Kapila in an aside:

*And what an ethereal shape! Such a broad back: like an ocean with muscles rippling across it—and then that small, feminine waist which looks so helpless. (134)*

Padmini's awareness of her incompleteness and her subsequent transformation in the process corresponds with that of Hayavadana. Just as Hayavadana's completeness does not come to pass till his laughter ends in a neigh through the intervention of Ganesha – "Unfathomable indeed is the mercy of the elephant-headed Ganesha. He fulfils the desires of all—a grandson to a grandfather, a smile to a child, a neigh to a horse," (186) – Padmini too finds her completeness in the accomplishment of her sexual gratification following her deliberate mix up when she fixes the detached heads to the wrong bodies, obviously of course with divine sanction. "Eagerly," we are told "Padmini attaches the severed heads to the bodies of the men. But in her excitement she mixes them up so that Devadatta's head goes to Kapila's body and vice versa" (142). And Kali, the Mother Goddess exclaims: "My dear daughter, there should be a limit even to honesty. Anyway, so be it!" (142) Kapila is indeed right when out of sheer exasperation, he exclaims: "I know what you want, Padmini. Devadatta's clever head and Kapila's strong body..." (148). And as time flies the 'strong body' is all that she desperately longs for. This is corroborated by the fact that she runs to Kapila's head and Devadatta's body when with the passage of time Kapila's body attached to Devadatta's turns soft and delicate again like his own original body, while on the other hand, Devadatta's original body itself which is attached to Kapila's head, becomes much stronger and muscular. No wonder then that in an intimate moment of amorous indulgence, resting her head in Kapila's chest, Padmini mutters romantically:

*My Kapila! My poor, poor Kapila! How needlessly you've tortured yourself. (171)*

Her resolve to speak her desire by liberating herself from the oppressive manacles of hegemonic cryptograms also finds an echo in the song of the Female Chorus:

*Why should love stick to the sap of a single body? When the stem is drunk with a thick yearning of the many-petalled, many-flowered lantana, why should it be tied down to the relation of a single flower?*

*A head for each breast. A pupil for each eye. A side for each arm. I have neither regret nor shame. The blood pours into the earth and a song branches out to the sky. (177-78)*

While the physical tran above vindicates, in tune wit is "being" that "determines what one notices in the att resistance to coherent mean gendered identity.

Similarly, Karnad's *Naga* of identity, difference and me time, the play centers round undergoes a momentous transf to a subject identity of unqua from modern the issues and cc in the context of marriage, fid it typically within the trajecto

Rani, 'Queen of the w daughter is married to a young attains her womanhood. But t dismay the entire world turn t greeted by her husband on the leaves her completely nonpluss after a tedious journey when A at noon. Keep my lunch ready He pays no attention to her, go away. She runs to the door, push He is gone. 254). When he cor speak of her fear and unease, say. On the contrary, he tells h you are told, you understand? for lunch.' (254-55)

Days roll by. But Rani's Appanna continues with his lec wife to a world of wretched ab rights of womanhood and ma ruthless patriarchal tyranny wi acknowledge her subjective id typical code of postcolonial mechanism of domination and tale of Rani's subjugation. In o returns after pouring the curry Kurudavva, earned her the love slave, into the ant-hill out of hard that she 'collapses to the t

While the physical transformation of the transposed bodies as witnessed above vindicates, in tune with the dialectics of nature, as Chari observes, that it is "being" that "determines consciousness, and not the other way round..." what one notices in the attitudinal subversion in Padmini is an emphatic resistance to coherent meaning as encoded in the concept of difference as a gendered identity.

## II

Similarly, Karnad's *Nagamandala* too, engages itself with the representations of identity, difference and meaning in much the same way as *Hayavadana*. This time, the play centers round the predicament of Rani, who, too, like Padmini undergoes a momentous transformation from an object of subjugation and betrayal to a subject identity of unqualified power. Although the setting of the play is far from modern the issues and concerns in regard to human relationships, especially in the context of marriage, fidelity, desire and fulfillment it draws upon, situates it typically within the trajectory of postcolonial dialectics.

Rani, 'Queen of the whole wide world' to her parents, being their only daughter is married to a young and rich man who takes her to his village after she attains her womanhood. But this cynosure of her parents discovers to her horrific dismay the entire world turn topsy-turvy as the cruel contempt with which she is greeted by her husband on the very first instance of her arrival in the new home leaves her completely nonplussed. Barely has the couple set their feet on the house after a tedious journey when Appanna declares, "Well, then, I'll be back tomorrow at noon. Keep my lunch ready. I shall eat and go". (*Rani looks at him nonplussed. He pays no attention to her, goes out, shuts the door, locks it from outside and goes away. She runs to the door, pushes it, finds it locked, peers out of the barred window. He is gone.* 254). When he comes home the next day for lunch and Rani tries to speak of her fear and unease, he is simply not interested in anything she has to say. On the contrary, he tells her brusquely: 'Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? (*Finishes his meal, gets up.*) I'll be back tomorrow for lunch.' (254-55)

Days roll by. But Rani's tale of woe and misery continues unabated as Appanna continues with his lecherous visits to his concubine leaving his legitimate wife to a world of wretched abjection. In the process, not only is she denied the rights of womanhood and marital bliss but she becomes a veritable martyr of ruthless patriarchal tyranny with the husband not so much as even prepared to acknowledge her subjective identity. In fact, instances of torture on the body, a typical code of postcolonial theatre for communicating to an audience, the mechanism of domination and control abound in this play to mark the gruesome tale of Rani's subjugation. In one such instance, ironically, the moment when she returns after pouring the curry that would have, according to the blind woman Kurudavva, earned her the love she was desperately craving for and made him her slave, into the ant-hill out of a sincere concern for him, Appanna slaps her so hard that she 'collapses to the floor'.

With the entry of Naga into her life things begin to change. Yet the new sense of fulfilment that comes to render a semblance of purpose and meaning to her life, too, is shrouded in mystery and is not totally devoid of patriarchal domination. The sexual initiation itself is a traumatic experience for her:

*I didn't know you were such a bad man. I should have known the moment you started using honeyed words. (Pause) Had I known, I would have never agreed to marry you. What will father and Mother say if they come to know? (275)*

True, she starts enjoying the liberating effects of sex with the passage of time through the manipulative efforts of Naga but she is also conditioned into accepting the silencing act she is subjected to both by Appanna and Naga because of the fear of losing the little succor and relief she has been able to find in the communion with Naga, her illusory husband, unaware of the truth relating to his identity. But the sense of pain experienced is obvious in the grudging acceptance of her predicament:

*No I won't. The pig, the whale, the eagle—none of them asks why. So I won't either. But they ask for it again. So, I can too. Can I? (276)*

Again, when she is asked by Naga to keep her pregnancy a secret as long as possible and to do as she is told, she retorts:

*Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. ... No, I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day. Embraces at night. The snarl in the morning unrelated to the caress at night. But day or night, one motto does not change. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. (283)*

Or,

*Why are you humiliating me like this? Why are you stripping me naked in front of the whole village? Why don't you kill me instead? I would have killed myself. But there's not even a rope in this house for me to use. (285)*

Rani's situation here can be said to be identical with Padmini's. Just as Padmini fails to have her desire fulfilled until the moment of supernatural intervention, so also Rani is incapable of finding her unbridled way to freedom and happiness till the snake ordeal she goes through—following Naga's suggestion—in the presence of the village elders, elevates her to the status of a goddess thereby giving her the satisfaction of being recognized as a subject identity to the extent that one of the elders cries out:

*Elder II: She is not a woman. She is a Divine Being. (292)*

"Divine Being" or not; at least Appanna falls at her feet and asks for forgiveness even when he knows for sure that the child Rani is about to deliver is not his. Yet his own sins, by his self avowal, have been so hideous that they

turn on him now with the life of a defenseless anguish:

*What am I to do? I even Nature should world say what it like sense am I to make*

His surrender is c throws away the oppress rule and falls headlong a

*Forgive me. I am e*

The awful predicar nemesis that his own im being reinforced here is are bound eventually to of time subsumed under

Rani, on the other freedom and contentme travesty of nuptial fidelis

*I was a stupid, ignor a wife, and I am goi. (283-84)*

little does she reali she is still very much s mysterious ways througl an object of male desire. into completeness the m of regret but with grate once again, like Padmi once out of the shackles authority convincing / the cobra but also to per validating his filial bon second ending, too, to permanent custody wit acceptance of Naga's institutionalized cultur

Thus from the posit space under a treacherot

turn on him now with such vengeful reversal that he is damned into leading the life of a defenseless cuckold persecuted by insufferable ignominy and silent anguish:

*What am I to do? Is the whole world against me? Have I sinned so much that even Nature should laugh at me? I know I haven't slept with my wife. Let the world say what it likes. Let any miracle declare her a goddess. But I know! What sense am I to make of my life that's worth nothing? (294)*

His surrender is complete when in a symbolic gesture of submission he throws away the oppressive lock on the door to signal the end of his tyrannous rule and falls headlong at Rani's feet declaring:

*Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind. (ibid)*

The awful predicament of Appanna, then, is not only an assertion of the nemesis that his own impudent actions have brought upon him but the point being reinforced here is that the metaphors of empowerment, at whatever level, are bound eventually to give in to the forces of resistance at any given moment of time subsumed under the cunning corridors of history.

Rani, on the other hand, is totally ignorant of the fact that the sense of freedom and contentment that happens to come her way is based on a blatant travesty of nuptial fidelity. And when she declares:

*I was a stupid, ignorant girl when you brought me here. But now I am a woman, a wife, and I am going to be a mother, I am not a parrot. Not a cat or a sparrow. (283-84)*

little does she realize that she may not be a parrot, a cat or a sparrow but she is still very much steeped in a world of deception unable to fathom the mysterious ways through which a woman could be manipulated into becoming an object of male desire. Yet, her innocence notwithstanding, she does blossom into completeness the moment she comes to acknowledge, not with any feeling of regret but with grateful indebtedness, the role of Naga in converting her, once again, like Padmini from a desired object into a desiring subject. And once out of the shackles of shame or regret she asserts her identity with singular authority convincing Appanna into allowing their son to not only cremate the cobra but also to perform annual rituals to commemorate its death thereby validating his filial bond with Naga through a most ingenious design. In the second ending, too, to the play she is daring enough to allow the cobra a permanent custody within the folds of her long tresses signifying thereby her acceptance of Naga's amoral erotic advances in brazen defiance of institutionalized cultural codes.

Thus from the position of one languishing in abject despondency in a liminal space under a treacherous masculine regime Rani, in course of time, comes to

occupy a location of indisputable authority. And the way she voices this authority with categorical timbre and resonance makes it abundantly clear that the laws of biological essentialism are not sufficient to address questions of identity and difference and that the meaning of difference itself as seen in the gendered body comes to be subverted because of the body's capacity to create meanings through its interactive association with ever emerging cultural and environmental constructs.

### III

As we turn finally to *The Fire and the Rain*, we encounter yet another very powerful play by Karnad encompassing issues on identity, difference, resistance et al., purportedly interrogating premises on which the modes of many hegemonistic representations come to imposingly stand. From a story, relatively speaking, of tangential import figuring in the "Vana Parva" of the *Mahabharata* involving the myth of Yavakrita, with its attendant discourse relating to patricide and fratricide Karnad goes on to create a magnificent play of human relationships caught in the elemental web of love, hate, jealousy, betrayal etc., as much as in the vortex of caste consciousness and communal bias, and of course their disastrous effects. Yet despite the plethora of issues that come to figure here, the engagement with the women question still continues, as in the plays already discussed, to occupy centre stage in the list of priorities. But while engaging with this issue *The Fire and the Rain* marks a significant departure in that instead of one central female character, there are two women here from different social and cultural backgrounds posited as markers of the marginalized as if to reinforce the universality of conditions that apply to exclusive forms of identity existing within immanent repressive structures of power and hegemony. Consequently, in the play under discussion, although Vishakha comes from an eminent upper caste Brahmin family and Nittilai, happens to be a tribal girl belonging to a family of hunters, both appear to be equally affected by the discriminatory politics of displacement and silencing. But the irony is Vishaka, instead of being privileged of the two while enjoying social accoutrements, by virtue of the superiority of her caste, is condemned to a contemptuous subjugation even worse off than Nittilai's. In fact she becomes a victim of multi-pronged patriarchal repression in that all the upper caste men, with the sole exception of Arvasu, who is himself ostracized by his community, persecute her in different ways. She is first abandoned by Yavakri, her former lover and then married off to Parvasu, against her will, by her father. Next, she is deserted by Parvasu, after using her body 'like an experimenter'. In a moment of misplaced trust, she narrates before Yavakri, her miserable existence thus:

*I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil. (122)*

Again,

*Yes, Father was happy. . .  
didn't matter. That nig  
didn't want to marry m  
used my body, and his o  
in a search. Search for  
too shameful, too degra  
I let my body be turne*

She is then betrayed by vengeful design. Finally, she not bother to acknowledge his own family, but even as when he comes to know of roars:

*You whore —you roving  
fitful of dust—with a s  
Paravasu, Chief Priest*

Yet all these instances women in *Hayavadana* and implications of gendered di the suffocating domination her body to Yavakri's lustful fire of pent up desire:

*Alone, I have become li  
To burn things around*

But, again, she is quick out the consecrated water fr been otherwise enough to m obviously horrified by the dis of her feelings by preying on:

*I was so happy this mor  
give.. It was more as a*

Consequently, she gra to thwart his attempt at es conducts at the same time thus putting into challenge difference.

Again,

*Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Paravasu. I didn't want to, but that didn't matter. That night of the wedding, my husband said to me: 'I know you didn't want to marry me. But don't worry. I'll make you happy for a year.' ... he used my body, and his own body like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own. (122 -23)*

She is then betrayed by Yavakri again when she becomes an easy prey to his vengeful design. Finally, she is subjected by her father-in-law, Rabhya – who does not bother to acknowledge her identity, not to speak of, as a respectable member of his own family, but even as a woman – to a most brutish treatment. For instance, when he comes to know of her torrid affair with Yavakri, he manhandles her and roars:

*You whore –you roving whore! I could reduce you to ashes—turn you into a fitful of dust—with a simple curse. But let that husband of yours handle you. Paravasu, Chief Priest of the sacrifice! Let him clean up his own shit! (127).*

Yet all these instances of repression notwithstanding, Vishaka too, like the women in *Hayavadana* and *Nagamandala*, strikes back by subverting the fixed implications of gendered difference itself. As a matter of fact, she breaks free from the suffocating domination of the hermitage for the first time when she submits her body to Yavakri's lustful advances in a moment of instinctive response to the fire of pent up desire:

*Alone, I have become like dry timber. Ready to burst into flames at a breath. To burn things around me down at the slightest chance— (123)*

But, again, she is quick to assert her sovereign essence by deliberately pouring out the consecrated water from Yavakri's *kamandalu*, a drop of which would have been otherwise enough to make the Brahma Rakshasa numb and powerless. She is obviously horrified by the discovery of Yavakri's insidious design in making a mockery of her feelings by preying on her in the disgraceful battle for Brahminical supremacy:

*I was so happy this morning. ... I wanted to envelope you in everything I could give.. It was more as a mother that I offered my breasts to you— (132)*

Consequently, she grabs the first available opportunity that comes her way to thwart his attempt at establishing his superiority over her father-in-law and conducts at the same time a personal vendetta by sending Yavakri to his doom thus putting into challenge the normative approach to notions of identity and difference.

Nittilai, also placed in an identical situation inasmuch as she too is not spared the harassment of the menacing forces of repression, appears to be relatively advantaged of the two women. This becomes clear when we look at the kind of freedom enjoyed by her as a tribal girl wandering freely in the forests leading a kind of life in consonance with the spontaneity of Nature as against Vishaka whose world is restricted to the confines of the hermitage alone. Having been nurtured by Nature, Nittilai also has the capacity to play the mother to the needy and the sick. Rightly, therefore, she questions the hypocritical stances of the upper class people, especially, the Brahmins and their pretensions across all areas of civilized and ritualistic concerns:

*But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything? You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in closed enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there. (116).*

In a classic example pertaining to the exposure of upper class hypocrisy with regard to their sexual attitudes, Nittilai states:

*Do you know why Father called the elders in such haste? He always says: "These high-caste men are glad to bed our women but not to wed them. (114)*

The situation, interestingly enough, finds its historical parallel in Robert J.C. Young's description of upper caste attitudes towards the Dalit women in India:

*... the upper castes exploit them economically, materially, and sexually, and subject them to constant mental and physical abuse. Women from lower castes were traditionally forbidden to cover their breasts with a blouse, so as to ensure their constant availability for predatory upper-caste men. (Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction. 119).*

It is exactly the knowledge of this façade of civilized attitudes put up by upper caste men in the society that Nittilai seems to be alluding to while talking of her Father's dislike of the 'high caste men'. But her own case is even more pathetic as she continues to be dominated by an oppressive male hegemony that denies her a subject identity and relegates her to the status of the marginalized in her own community itself. For it is the men like her brother and her husband who prevent her from enjoying the marital bliss with the man of her choice. But braving all opposition and impediments she runs away from her husband, from her family, from everything, in fact to escape into the company of Arvasu to perform together with him the regenerative act of providing succour to suffering humanity. Even in the midst of dire personal crisis her concern is for those distressed in want of food and supplement.

*Let me arrange for some family wants to go with*

In spite of all that she owns community and the slightest grudge against any compromise and understar against his brother for havit the world', she consoles hi inspiring:

*Then kick that world  
We can find our own. (1*

Such a language can ex own status and knows exact and discretion. Obviously, t confines of terrestrial inac regenerative inclinations in blessing most sought after b

*CROWDS: Rain! Arvas*

Ironically, it is not Parvasu brings in the rain but the sa

*She lies there, her eyes op*

Nittilai thus illustrates her death, through her reas resist meaning and displace biological, social, cultural or

What transpires from i with the concepts of identit context of the repressed and race, gender, caste and comm Karnad appears to be prima women within the narrative included in patriarchal struc examples drawn by him of tl negotiate or even subvert esta and forms of identity thei recognizable. A voice in fact, itself by playing a seminal t crucial to the development c

*Let me arrange for something to eat on the way. Some meat. Fruit. The actor's family wants to go with us. Those poor starving babies. (153).*

In spite of all that she has suffered in the hands of the men from both her own community and the high caste fraudsters she does not seem to bear the slightest grudge against any of her tormenters. Her attitude simply is one of compromise and understanding. When Arvasu, for instance, swears revenge against his brother for having made him 'an unregenerate sinner in the eyes of the world', she consoles him in a language distinctly self-assuring and awe inspiring:

*Then kick that world aside, Arvasu. ... We don't need this world. We can find our own. (155)*

Such a language can exude only from one who is absolutely confident of her own status and knows exactly what to look for in situations warranting judgment and discretion. Obviously, therefore, she can extricate herself from the tangled confines of terrestrial inadequacies and become in her death, true to her regenerative inclinations in life, a veritable representation of "rain," the celestial blessing most sought after by the people:

*CROWDS: Rain! Arvasu, ask for the rains! Water—(173)*

Ironically, it is not Parvasu or the seven year long pompous fire sacrifice that brings in the rain but the sacrifice to which Nittlai is subjected to:

*She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal. (172)*

Nittlai thus illustrates through her eventful career, even at the moment of her death, through her reassuring behavioral postures the amazing capacity to resist meaning and displace difference as a stable code of any state of existence biological, social, cultural or otherwise.

What transpires from the above discussion, then, is Karnad's engagement with the concepts of identity and location and their significance in the life and context of the repressed and the marginalized. While all kinds of categories like race, gender, caste and community come within the purview of the marginalized, Karnad appears to be primarily inclined towards a discourse on the location of women within the narrative framework of certain social and cultural practices included in patriarchal structures of power and hegemony. In the process, the examples drawn by him of the repressed women in the texts in question serve to negotiate or even subvert established notions with regard to their subject positions and forms of identity thereby endowing them with a voice that is easily recognizable. A voice in fact, that is capable of altering the meaning of difference itself by playing a seminal role in the formation of positive forms of identity crucial to the development of plural societies.



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NEGOTIA  
READING  
POE

ABSTRACT: *Jayanta* is an identity which though a past in Mahapatra's images that create a world lived experience. His la terms of an individual's a postcolonial theoretical.

Keywords: *postcol*

Any attempt to read of post-colonialism, with Mahapatra's concern to colonizer, and asserting tradition and culture, at the recent history, puts country. This paper is perspective of his deep negotiation of the past, identity. Encompassing for the future. Owing to limitations of space, this in the mid-nineties.

Published in *Poetry* poems which reveals his opening stanza of the spirit of true India.

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(Delhi: Pencraft  
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Introduction

## NEGOTIATING PAST AND PRESENT: A READING OF JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S POETRY POSTCOLONIALY

*Deetimali Barua Nath*

**ABSTRACT:** *Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry provides an interesting study of national identity which though constructed in the present takes recourse to the colonial past. The past in Mahapatra's poetic universe emerges in the form of myths, legends and images that create a world of Indianness in terms of tradition and an individual's lived experience. His later poetry reflects this blend of the past and the present, in terms of an individual's situational experience in the Indian context. This paper applies a postcolonial theoretical framework in an effort to analyse Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry.*

**Keywords:** *postcolonial, identity, history, cultural roots.*

Any attempt to read Jayanta Mahapatra's poetry with the aesthetic paradigm of post-colonialism, would invariably impel one to view it, as a reflection of Mahapatra's concern to establish a native tradition, by resisting the former colonizer, and asserting national identity. The desire to write about an indigenous tradition and culture, and establish an identity, independent of the colonizer in the recent history, puts Mahapatra on the fore-front of postcolonial poets in our country. This paper is an attempt to study Mahapatra's later poetry in the perspective of his deep concern for national identity. It analyses Mahapatra's negotiation of the past, through the lens of the present in his search for national identity. Encompassing the past and the present, Mahapatra embodies a vision for the future. Owing to the large canvas of Mahapatra's poetic oeuvre and obvious limitations of space, this paper attempts to limit itself to a study of poetry written in the mid-nineties.

Published in *Poetry Review*, "A Pastoral Perhaps" is one of Mahapatra's later poems which reveals his deep concern for national identity and nationhood. The opening stanza of the poem depicts a village scene, which is evocative of the true spirit of true India.

By the scummy pond, in the thin rain,  
 A woman shakes her hair loose,  
 before entering the water. Through the grove  
 of bamboos dripping bright raindrops,  
 A long abandoned thought appears to push a smile at her lips.

(1999: 1-5)

The image of the village woman entering the pond, shaking her hair loose to have her bath, and the raindrops dripping through the bamboo grove, brings rural India alive in the minds of the readers. The second stanza reinforces the idea of true India lying in her villages, when the landscape is integrated with the history of the country and the past is harmonized with the present and merges with it. Mahapatra writes:

Leaves green, sway under the cloudy sky  
 And only the woman's sunbronzed face looks out  
 above the water. The air drops back into the past,  
 A part present seems to break away  
 The destiny of India heaves in darkness,  
 in the memory of ancient waters.

The history of India now lies in the pond where the woman bathes, it is in a way, relocating the past in the present, a preoccupation of post colonial poets and writers. A poet's response to the landscape of his country, his sense of the tradition and culture of the land of his birth, and other factors go together to make him assume an identity of his own. Mahapatra has stated this view while receiving the National Academy of Letters Award – "To this land in which my roots lie and lies my past, and in which my beginning and my end, — I acknowledge my debt and my relationship". Legends, history and myths of Orissa interest Mahapatra immensely, and Puri, Konark, Cuttack and Bhubaneswar form, as it were, the quadrangle in the landscape of his poetry. He has acclimatized the native Oriya tradition to the English, which makes his poetry distinct. Mahapatra tries to bring alive the past of his own country in a new Indian English medium. It is in line of the thesis that the writers of the epoch making book, *The Empire Writes Back*, put forth – a re-assertion of nationhood by the post-colonial poet. Mahapatra links the past to the present and creates a dialogue with the future.

Jayanta Mahapatra creates poetry out of the contemporary situation. He encounters reality with the insight of a scientist, and portrays it with the objectivity of an artist. Deeply concerned with socio-political problems, he tries to come to terms with the reality, and is conscious of keeping the image of his country alive. Observing contemporary society from close quarters, he is depressed with the outbreak of violence and lawlessness all over the country. In the postcolonial era, the bravery and heroism of the struggle against colonialism seems to be missing. The significance of the past and the sacrifice of our ancestors are lost, and this state of affairs grieves the poet. In a voice marked by anguish Mahapatra asks:

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In another poem, "past" of broken empires; hearkening back to the past poet drifts through his poems. The present appreciated and endure future, which is being used as a medium to interpret literature is concerned with the future. "Through Moral Uncertainty" "Where I live today and I suffering that erupts out of the past" (2000: 6). Mahapatra re-creates the past and the harsh re-

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The colonial past  
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And I, writing my poem again  
 What do I remember of faith and past hopes?  
 ("Shadow Space". 1997: 14)

Mahapatra notices a sharp contrast between the past and the present, leading to an overwhelming decline, in the postcolonial period. In the same poem, he denounces the present generation for failing their ancestors:

Today when I participate in group discussions  
 the words I read and hear,  
 seem simply to walk the globe together  
 holding hands but no truths come down to the streets.

(1997: 16)

In another poem, "Relationship", Mahapatra brings alive for a moment the past "of broken empires and vanquished dynasties" (1997: 23). There is a nostalgic hearking back to the past and a sense of belonging overwhelming the poet. The poet drifts through his weariness, listening to the voices of his friends and writing poems. The present according to Mahapatra would be better understood, appreciated and endured in the light of the past. Mahapatra has realized the future, which is being comprehended, and therefore, poetry for him, now becomes a medium to interpret life, and a source of sustenance. As a postcolonial poet, he is concerned with the fate of humanity in our country. In one of his essays entitled "Through Moral Uncertainties: English Poetry Today", Mahapatra writes — "Where I live today and have lived all my life, I know that there is much suffering, suffering that erupts out of many causes mainly economic and social" (*JTWE*, 2000: 6). Mahapatra realizes that the world is full of contradictions and, in the poem "The Stories in Poetry" he tries to bring a balance between the illusion of the past and the harsh reality of the present:

Through words  
 I try to recover my balance  
 Not let life get too far ahead of me.

(1997: 59)

The colonial past haunts him without end and, when it is placed by the side of uncertain and disturbed present, it adds to the anxiety and worries of the poet. Mahapatra brings alive the past in no uncertain terms in a poem called, "The Absence of Knowledge".

This ground is jagged with the defeat  
 Of races, of morphines of memories;  
 Huge shadows and dark waters of a life time  
 Now come after us, climbing our way.

(1997: 75)

The post colonial era is not much of an improvement on the colonial; rather it seems to be a continuation of it. Using darkness as a metaphor for ignorance, which is akin to absence of knowledge, the poet reflects on the colonial past and turbulent present in a poem called "Darkness". He asks for a way out:

From a window here and a door there  
Darkness lifted its head and looked  
Who would show the way?

It flaunted its shape, gathering moments  
From the light of hostile history.  
Then came and stood out there  
In a middle - class neighbourhood, stark naked.  
(1999: 49)

The 'hostile history' refers to the colonial past that haunts the postcolonial present. The colonial system and laws are still in operation as we have inherited the British Administrative and Judicial system. This brings to mind one of Mahapatra's earlier observations — "It is thus the odour of a captured country that lingers" (Life Signs, 1983). Mahapatra is making a whole hearted effort to decolonise the typical psyche which is still overburdened with the colonial past. His knowledge of the native language and inwardness with indigenous tradition and culture are a great help. Like other postcolonial poets in India, Africa and Caribbean countries, Mahapatra tries to revive the cultural identity, damaged by the colonial experience. Elleke Boehmer makes a pertinent point in this regard — "Indian, African and Caribbean nationalist writers focused on reconstituting from the position of their historical, racial or metaphysical difference a cultural identity which has been damaged by colonial experience. The need was for roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national fore-mothers and fathers: in short, for restorative history" (1995:185 - 86). This is what Mahapatra does in his poetry. He tries to evoke a typical Indian atmosphere by describing the Indian sky, landscape and even abandoned temples. The attempt to build a lively atmosphere out of the surroundings and evoke a sense of 'nativism' is part of postcolonial writings. The postcolonial writers seek to describe the indigenous culture and thereby assert their nationality.

Mahapatra applauds the native culture and tradition, to assert national identity. Like Raja Rao, he tries to create a contemporary myth out of Gandhi in his recent poetry. Gandhi has become a living myth, suggesting non-violence, truth and righteousness. Furthermore, Gandhi has also become a synonym for justice and honesty, and has passed into the Indian mind as an apostle of peace. To defy Gandhi becomes an integral part of post-colonial literature. In his poem "Excerpts for Requiem", he glorifies ahimsa and, in trying to mythicize Gandhi, he realizes that one can be an authentic writer by going back to his / her roots. Mahapatra wants to decolonize himself and his culture so that he can be original and authentic as a poet. He acknowledges Gandhi's unseen presence amongst us,

the Indians. He writes:

In me  
Your body  
As if you h  
As if flesh  
What the i

In the same poem  
forgotten Gandhi's ideals  
birthday as a mere ritual.

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the Indians. He writes:

In me  
Your body opens slowly  
As if you have been bound tight all your life,  
As if flesh could see  
What the mind believes is true.

(2000: 10)

In the same poem he tells us how, in the postcolonial present, we have forgotten Gandhi's ideals and relegated him to the background by observing his birthday as a mere ritual. With a tinge of irony he writes:

What you have left behind are  
faded pictures on bare office walls. A day  
every year as a national holiday.

(2000: 16)

Through the myth of Gandhi he is trying to trace the anguish and predicament of the postcolonial present. If creating national myths is part of postcolonial writing, then Mahapatra's perception regarding the myth of Gandhi can perhaps be read with postcolonial writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Nissim Ezekiel.

The eminent critic P.P.Raveendran remarks, "Mahapatra's struggle with the colonial past seems to be an on-going process" (1995: 14). It is thus very difficult to identify a neat point of rupture, between the colonized past and the postcolonial present. Elements connected with the past and present co-exist in his poetry. To read Mahapatra's poetry is to acquire a kind of empathy with contemporary life. Along with other Indian English poets he has created a new idiom that has defined a place of identity and a state of reaffirmation in the midst of contradictions. He tries to evoke native traditions and myths, in order to recreate the past in postcolonial terms, and assert national identity. He is not oblivious of the present as the past and the present together form a new whole. His poetry takes the past into orbit, infuses it with the present and looks forward to the future. Using poetry as a vehicle for the expression of Indian scene (past and present) he has been able to find a new name and expression for postcolonial poetry in our country.

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## MULTIPLE N LEILA

**ABSTRACT.** *Negotiating* has been a crucial issue for the paper attempts to read through multiple barriers to carve a family but, more importantly, outside.

**Keywords:** *autobiography*

One of the most significant, particularly Third World, social and cultural forces has been and continues to be relevant to the case of the relationship between the self and the other. Recent explorations and Flavia Agnes' and Partha Chatterjee's term "all-inclusive discourse" of autobiographies written by women of color and their complexities. While the legacy of hegemonic patriarchy

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MULTIPLE NEGOTIATIONS: A READING OF  
LEILA SETH'S *ON BALANCE: AN  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

*Kalpana Bora Barman*

**ABSTRACT.** *Negotiating the boundaries of social and cultural constructs has always been a crucial issue for the Indian woman. The inclusion of the legal intricacies into an already complex web further highlights the tentative position of the woman. This paper attempts to read the life of one such woman who attempts to transcend these multiple barriers to carve a niche for herself not only in the personal sphere of the family but, more importantly, within the larger socio-politico-legal sphere of the world outside.*

**Keywords:** *autobiography, gender, law, postcolonial.*

I

One of the most significant trends in contemporary feminist scholarship, particularly Third World feminism, has been the re-examination of the political, social and cultural forces that contribute greatly to the ways in which gender has been and continues to be constructed and negotiated. This is especially relevant to the case of the Indian woman who becomes the crucible on which the relationship between political legalities, social practices and cultural norms is played out. Recent explorations, such as those by Lata Mani, Kumkum Sangari, and Flavia Agnes<sup>1</sup> among others, reveal that "the woman question," to use Partha Chatterjee's term, is not one to be examined in isolation; rather it is an all-inclusive discourse that necessitates detailed deliberation. In this context, autobiographies written by women become sites for exploration of such complexities. While the lives of women can be read as narratives of legitimization of hegemonic patriarchal discourses, the very act of writing an autobiography



suggest the interrogation of the gendered norms and a redefinition of spaces assigned to women.

It is on the premise of these observations that the life-narrative of Leila Seth, the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India, can be contextualized. Her autobiography *On Balance* is not only a personal narrative of a life well-lived, but also a map of a society in transition from tradition to modernity. Born in 1930 to Raj Behari Seth and Chanda Seth, Leila spent her early years in huge bungalows with big sprawling gardens. Her father's prestigious position as a senior Railways officer allowed the family to enjoy the luxury of servants and holidays in white-saloon cars. Her western-educated mother ensured that the benefits of convent education were received by her daughter too so that Leila soon begins to "think and dream in English" (Seth 8). The death of Raj Behari Seth shatters this idyllic world save for the goodwill and charity of friends and relatives who see the family through their difficult times.

After Leila's marriage to Premo Seth and the birth of their eldest son Vikram, the family moved to London where Leila applied for admission to the Bar. She topped the Bar examinations, thus becoming the first woman to do so, and soon returned to India to begin practice. In a career that began on a tentative note Leila broke ground by competing in a profession that was traditionally considered as a male preserve and where females were rare. She held on her own by refusing to take up cases related to women. Rather she chose to work on tax matters, constitutional law, and civil and criminal case, "When I started practicing, I wanted to prove myself as a mainstream lawyer, not follow the stereotype of a woman lawyer" (Seth 414). She earned many firsts to her credit: besides becoming the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court, she also earned the distinction of being the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court, the first woman Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court, and the first woman to be a member of the Law Commission. She also maintained a fine balance between her work and home to mother her three talented and successful children: Vikram, the eldest, is a renowned writer and author of the 1993 best-seller *A Suitable Boy*; the second son, Shantam, is a well-known peace-activist; and Aradhana, the youngest, is a leading art director in films.

Seamlessly intertwining the private and public worlds of Seth's life the narrative of *On Balance* is characterized by profound honesty and eloquence, and is interspersed with personal and professional vignettes and anecdotes. Leila is honest and outspoken, whether it is in publicly acknowledging the bisexuality of her first-born, the death of her daughter Ira, or her personal account of the sexual politics, corruption and malpractices in the judiciary. In the rendition of her story Seth makes discreet pointers to the many socio-cultural discourses that inform the social/cultural/legal role of the Indian woman. This paper is an attempt to examine Leila Seth's life as a site of cultural and legal exchanges that inform her role as a woman and a lawgiver. However, before engaging with the sub-textual

intricacies of Seth's life legality within which t

Gender has played a significant role in the legal system in India. This paper would begin with the sensibilities brought at masculine cultural nationalism by a political campaign by a woman rooted in the private and public spheres of a male-centered dogma of cultural ideology on the one hand and that the reconstitution of women and the Brahmacharya movement on the other. This rearticulation" (Manohar on the discourse of separatism, purity, a vigorous protest against their corrupt and the Hindu Widow National sovereignty, and the intricacies of the lives of women to effectively constitute Nationalist Resolution on the dichotomies of that contribute to the cc. Thus women became the neither subjects nor objects of projects intersect" (Manohar

Within the discourse continued to exist. The Succession Act resulted in Agnes points out, served patrilineal, north India parameters originated of social progress. The much modernizing agenda, the state became the chief n

intricacies of Seth's life it is important to examine the multi-layered discourse of legality within which the trope of the "Indian" woman is constructed.

## II

Gender has played a pivotal role in the structuring and codification of the legal system in India. A brief history of the struggle for the rights of women would begin with the transformation of the indigenous politico-cultural sensibilities brought about by the colonial rule. This led to the emergence of a masculine cultural nationalism that sought to establish the distinctiveness of its political campaign by conceptualizing a traditional culture that was essentially rooted in the private feminine space. In a major departure from the western, male-centered dogma the new indigenous patriarchy based its nationalist and cultural ideology on the metaphor of the female. In this context Lata Mani argues that the reconstitution of tradition under the colonial rule led to the centralizing of women and the Brahmanic scripture that became "interlocking grounds for this rearticulation" (Mani 2006:90). The re-working of women as tradition rested on the discourse of salvation.<sup>2</sup> It signaled "a recuperation of authenticity and purity, a vigorous protection of the weak and the subordinated aspects of culture against their corrupt manipulation by the strong and the dominant" (Mani 2006:118). The political negotiation of woman's role and her rights perhaps gained utmost prominence during the colonial period with the abolition of *sati* in 1829 and the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. Women's reform symbolized national sovereignty, and since most reform measures addressed the socio-cultural intricacies of the lives of the Hindu middle-class women, the latter group came to effectively constitute the "nation" (Agnes 2006: xxxi). In his essay titled "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" Partha Chatterjee elaborates on the dichotomies of the inner/outer, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine, that contribute to the construction of the social roles of gender (2006: 238-239). Thus women became the currency of tradition. As Lata Mani states, "women are neither subjects nor objects but rather the ground [...] on which several competing projects intersect" (Mani 2006:118-119).

Within the discourse of the Hindu family the centrality of gender relations continued to exist. The property rights extended to women under the Hindu Succession Act resulted in the essentializing of gender relations and, as Flavia Agnes points out, served to "heirarchize an upper-caste, upper-class, propertied, patrilineal, north Indian male tradition" (2006 xxxii). Within this cultural parameters originated the concept of the new nation state and its ideology of social progress. The much-trumpeted Hindu Code Bill, with its progressive and modernizing agenda, empowered the state to structure social relations. As the state became the chief negotiator of the rights of women, the autonomy of the

latter was further reduced.<sup>3</sup> The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 granted widows the right of ownership of property, and equal rights were also conferred on daughters in the self-acquired property of the father but this was exclusive of landholdings and agricultural property. The notions of conjugality, morality, and maintenance also became the premise of the legal body. The question of a woman's maintenance rights was invariably entangled with the issue of her sexual morality. Such legal and public differentiation is solely based on their private roles and spaces, and is a pointer to the ways in which (patriarchal) laws and legality collude in order to determine the many roles women are expected to play. The reformed Hindu law was projected as an ideal piece of legislation that liberated the Hindu women. While the motives of the reform were the consolidation of the powers of the state and the building of an integrated nation, this crucial objective could be achieved only by diluting the rights of women.

A key issue that evolves in this context is that of citizenship. Citizenship, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan says, "entails everyday, existential negotiation with bureaucratic regulations, welfare institutions, and the functionaries of the state; and entails being regulated by and having recourse to the laws of the land (Sunder Rajan 2003:1). She quotes Nira Yuval-Davis and Prina Werbner's statements on the feminist implications of citizenship as signifying a "more total relationship, inflected by identity, social positioning, cultural assumptions, institutional practices and a sense of belonging" (Sunder Rajan 1). The gendering of citizenship draws attention to the ways in which "women" are constructed by the state—they are not only differentiated from men, but they are also differentiated from among themselves. Thus women are assigned different positions within the homogenous framework of the state and legality, and within their localized linguistic, religious and cultural communities. This dual citizenship highlights the private/public division, for while it propels women into the same identity-category as men in terms of legal and civil rights, it demarcates her position within the private sphere of the family and religious community. As Sunder Rajan puts it, the concept of citizenship is thus premised on the rhetoric of exclusion.

The distinction between the private and the public spheres also confine women to typically female spaces such as housework, reproduction, motherhood, and nurturance, and away from the public agenda of the liberal state (Benhabib 1992: 108). It is their unpaid work as home-makers, mothers, and nurturers that differentiate them from men—a difference that is crucially significant for their citizenship rights. The feminist slogan "the personal is the political" is a strong pointer to the blurring of the distinction between the two spaces. The legal implications of rape can be considered as an example here. The inherent fear of women's sexuality has led to the establishment of codes of conduct that sought to curb this feared concept, which in turn can be traced back to men's desire to control property. More often than not women (read victim) bear the onus of

psychosocial trauma and punishment. Despite the fact that women's sexuality find its juristic statement does not quite, the *bhadramahila* construct as to safeguard this complexity occurs not within the sanctum sanctorum primarily because the law

Thus in the sphere of men, but the private sphere matters," such as marriage maintenance the period of administration—are brought with religious and community. Uniform Civil Code (UCC) blanket of the UCC will eventually secure Hindu as well as the multi-cultural discriminatory regulations the administration of the pro-women in certain

What dawns from the receiving end of the of the woman one with both private and public motives of self-interest structure.

Given the many of it becomes relatively easy context. The position of is a crucial signifier of feminism can be traced, and progressive" parent education" (Seth 4) celebrating thinking in a country Leila writes of her mother westernized, calling her:

psychosocial trauma and shame while the accused (read male) escapes with liminal punishment. Despite the fact that such invasion of the female private self and sexuality find its juristic stance in the public sphere of legality, often the victim's statement does not qualify as valid primarily because it signals the refutation of the *bhadramahila* construct. In most cases women forgo certain judicial rights so as to safeguard this constructed womanhood. The internalization of these complexities occurs not only at the social sphere but also in the legal sphere. Even within the sanctum sanctorum of the family, cases of marital rape are silenced primarily because the legal system exists outside this extremely private space.

Thus in the sphere of public jurisdiction women are equated the same status as men, but the private sphere exists outside the realms of justice so that in "personal matters," such as marriage, inheritance, divorce, the custody of children, and maintenance the personal laws of the community—a legacy of colonial administration—are brought into operation. This dual-jurisprudence coupled with religious and communal differences is at the centre of the argument of the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). Modelled on the Hindu laws of the 1950s, the legal blanket of the UCC was envisaged as a version of the Hindu law that would eventually secure Hindu hegemony. Paradoxically, both the all-encompassing UCC as well as the multi-community personal laws are united in their negative and discriminatory regulations towards women. Also, the Hindu ideologues seeking the administration of the UCC resisted reforms in the personal laws that were pro-women in certain directions.

What dawns from this discussion is the obvious fact that women have been at the receiving end of both patriarchal and legal structures. In fact, in the context of the woman one witnesses the collusion between patriarchy and law so that both private and public subjugation is complete. It is a further pointer to the motives of self-interest of patriarchy that finds a happy complement in the legal structure.

### III

Given the many changes in and complexities of the social and legal systems, it becomes relatively easy for the reader to comprehend the life of Leila Seth in context. The position of women in the pre-independence socio-political scenario is a crucial signifier of the cultural moment in which the beginnings of Indian feminism can be traced. It is no wonder therefore that her "different, exceptional and progressive" parents "who had been influenced by the western culture and education" (Seth 4) celebrated Leila Seth's birth—a rare example of progressive thinking in a country where the practice of female infanticide was common. Leila writes of her mother who "had all kinds of woolly thoughts about being westernized, calling her son-to-be 'Sonny' and decorating her home with Victorian

furniture" (Seth 5). Education was seen as the key to progress and liberal and rational thinking. The importance of education for the Seth family as well as for the colonized nation is acutely highlighted in Leila's own words; "Education is the key to prosperity, to a fuller enjoyment of life, to the avoidance of easy prejudice, to being able to help people more effectively" (Seth 417). Raj Kumar Seth or Michibhai further testifies to this when he writes to his sister Leila "I became very anglicized but that was the flavour of the period and I think because of it [we] were all able to get a start in life" (Seth 41). The fact that both mother and daughter were beneficiaries of Western education is a pointer to the changing attitudes of the pre-independence society that was beginning to recognize the more positive implications of Western thought brought about by colonialism. The colonial implications of education notwithstanding, the Hindu middle-class saw education as an agency of modernization and emancipation so that its benefits were extended to both men and women. However, education did not result in any substantial change in the position of women as their social and political status were continued to be defined by their traditional and private roles.

Leila's entry into the legal profession marks a moment of great historical and cultural significance. She applied for admission to the Bar "not because of any love or aptitude for Law, but because I would need to look after three-year-old Vikram [...] and therefore needed a course where the attendance requirements were not too strict" (Seth 97). Her success in the Bar examinations created quite a stir in both London and India. Upon her return to the native country the brilliance of the Bar Final results shattered her dream of opening a small nursery school because everybody expected her to practice and perform.<sup>4</sup> A career that began at a moment of domestic and maternal obligations, Leila's admission into the Bar marks a moment when the feminine private space makes its foray into the masculine public arena. This reversal of public-private exchanges and the subsequent dissolution of both spaces signify a key cultural moment when established norms are subverted not by socio-cultural coercion but by personal choice. Read in the larger context of Indian nationalism and Indian feminism Leila's choice transcends the theoretical demarcations of political thinking in order to make a space for her self. Nevertheless, this reversal of spatial entry and the intermixing of the two do not anticipate the reversal of cultural roles assigned to gendered community. An example of this can be had from the following conversation between Leila Seth and Sachin Chaudhuri whose chambers the former joined:

Despite the fact that [Sachin Chaudhuri] had some idea why [Leila] had come, he wanted to be clear about the matter and asked me, "Why?" in his grave and gruff manner. After I told him, he said, "Instead of joining the legal profession, young woman, go and get married." I replied, "But Sir, I am already married." "Then go and have a child," he advised. I responded,

"I have a child." "It is : should have a second c children." Taken aback chambers, you are a pe (Seth 121-122)

The position of women any changes in the same an where Leila began practice is this young lawyer who was r well. The fact that she actual comforts of her home (Pren Company at that time) surp

The prevalent caste, rel cracks in this colossus. Whi quite often in the form of ca more to the allegations of w her career. Her constant atte system met with much critic social and cultural patriarchi position of the Judge in the Court as Senior Advocate ar position of power that the leg her much power as a member of the Patna high Court rests from the lack of suitable pr level Leila's decision reads as to stem his professional grow Leila act colludes with her ov certain opportunities in orde the *karva chaath* fast not beca in-law, and later in her memo the multi-layered workings o in a public arena she seeks to

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"I have a child." "It is not fair to the child to be alone, so, young lady, you should have a second child." I replied: "Mr. Chaudhuri, I already have two children." Taken aback for the third time, he said, "Then come and join my chambers, you are a persistent young woman and will do well at the Bar." (Seth 121-122)

The position of women and the reluctance of the patriarchy to incorporate any changes in the same are evident here, as well as in the Patna High Court where Leila began practice in 1959. Much curiosity and amusement surrounded this young lawyer who was not only confident and smart but also spoke English well. The fact that she actually chose the dusty corridors and courtrooms over the comforts of her home (Premo, her husband, was the manager of the Bata Shoe Company at that time) surprised everyone.

The prevalent caste, religious and gender politics the legal system reveals the cracks in this colossus. While caste and religious insecurities raised their heads quite often in the form of cases pertaining to the village-folk, Leila was subjected more to the allegations of womanly frivolousness and gender bias that dogged her career. Her constant attempts to make a difference in the steel frame of the system met with much criticism, which revealed the underlying workings of the social and cultural patriarchies in the lives of women. Having twice declined the position of the Judge in the Patna High Court, Leila soon joined the Supreme Court as Senior Advocate and later the Delhi High Court as Chief Justice. The position of power that the legal system endows her with, however, does not grant her much power as a member of a cultural community. Her refusal of the Judgeship of the Patna high Court rests on the premise that her husband Premo will suffer from the lack of suitable professional opportunities in Patna. On the personal level Leila's decision reads as an act of love for her husband, as she does not want to stem his professional growth at the cost of her own. On a more political level, Leila act colludes with her own gendered position as a woman who must give up certain opportunities in order to facilitate the betterment of her family. She holds the *karva chauth* fast not because she believed in it but for the sake of her mother-in-law, and later in her memory. As an Indian woman, Leila successfully negotiates the multi-layered workings of her private and gendered location, and as a lawyer in a public arena she seeks to make changes, even if small, in the same.

The twin workings of the private/public persona become evident in the incident pertaining to the medical treatment of Leila's mother who was unwell. The mother of the judge of a court was entitled to medical treatment at the government's expense, but this provision was not extended to woman judges. On enquiring Leila was told that as per tradition sons were supposed to look after their mothers, and daughters (read women) had little to do in this matter. The legal lacuna in this provision is clearly rooted in the cultural position of the

Hindu woman who, after marriage, had nothing to do in the matters regarding her maternal family.<sup>2</sup> The Hindu personal laws combined with the legal provision refused to grant cultural and legal rights to the daughter to look after her aging parents, and Leila, despite occupying a professional (read public) position of power continues to be governed by and subjected to the legalities resting on the private space. Her vociferous claims of the equal implications of the law for both men and women fail to make any impact and the chasm continued to exist. That she did not pursue the matter further is another story for Chanda Seth died soon hereafter.

Throughout her innings as a member of the legal system Leila Seth continued to crusade for the twin objectives of justice and equality. Her negotiation of the property rights of daughters in the 15<sup>th</sup> Law Commission is important step in this direction. Headed by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy the Commission suggested fundamental changes in the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 to ensure that women get an equal share in the ancestral property. One of the radical changes suggested as part of the Hindu (Amendment) Bill 2000 is equal rights for daughters in coparcenary property, i. e. in a Hindu joint family the daughter shall have the same property rights as a son and the property will be equally divided. A move that aimed at the erosion of gender discrimination, Leila was also hopeful that the right to equal inheritance would greatly reduce the dowry system. She further hoped that once patriarchal attitudes changed and men got reconciled to the fact that they would have to share everything with their sisters, conflicts involving family property will be resolved to a great extent.

#### IV

How radical is Leila Seth as a member of the law? How far does she push the legal system to ensure, or perhaps even initiate changes for the gendered community? The answers to these questions perhaps are very obvious. Seth does not make any path-breaking attempts to radicalize the legal structures pertaining to women. An insight into her life would reveal that she has always been the champion for equality and equal rights. Her refusal to take up women's cases was not a shying away from the crucial problems pertaining to women but a refusal to be typecast as a stereotype; it was an attempt to prove her legal worth as woman in a male-dominated profession; and, more importantly, it was an attempt to establish herself as an equal in this profession. Her successful innings as a lawyer/judge stands proof of determination to succeed. While she may have invited criticism for not doing enough for the sister-community—"What kind of a woman judge are you that you don't give any special weightage to women? We had such high hopes of you" (Seth 261)—she must also be applauded for refusing to be ghettoized into such gendered and political groups. A feminist her own right,

Leila Seth's awareness and her to emphasize the need. Her ideology of equality wherein she strove for better but her judgments reveal substantial changes in the monolith is a pointer to throwing open its doors.

An autobiography of life and times of a progressive future generation, Nandini lives lest the latter is not at the framework of autobiography making, and of a generation the times. Leila Seth's story route women's lives have between home and the workplace their own understanding of dominance and assertion that denied women the right lawyers in the present day barriers to ensure a gender the motivating force that has and carve a space for them

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Flavia Agnes' *Women and the Law* and Sudesh Vaid's *Mani's Contentious*
- <sup>2</sup> The prohibition of emancipation in marriage debate and that the importance of marriage and the role of the community that while the debate scriptural interpretations hardships and social
- <sup>3</sup> Interestingly, despite and equal rights for the traditional role of the nation.

Leila Seth's awareness and comprehension of the position of women in Indian led her to emphasize the need for education to overcome the various demarcations. Her ideology of equality holds true both in her personal and professional life wherein she strove for betterment alone. Her legal dealings may seem conservative but her judgments reveal her liberal outlook. She may not have introduced any substantial changes in the legal system, but her very membership of the legal monolith is a pointer to the changes in the Indian judicial system which was throwing open its doors for the women community.

An autobiography that began with an accident, *On Balance* is a record of the life and times of a progressive woman. It is also a grandmother's offering to her future generation, Nandini, so that she learns about the times in her grandparents lives lest the latter is not around to tell her about it personally. The book transcends the framework of autobiographical writings to narrate the story of an India-in-the-making, and of a generation that was witness to the socio-political turbulence of the times. Leila Seth's story, one of hard-won idealism and success, also maps the route women's lives have been undertaking in their efforts to negotiate a space between home and the world outside, between their constructed subjectivities and their own understanding of their selves, between cultural forces of coercive dominance and assertion of their rights within this sphere. From the early provision that denied women the right to practise law to the increase in the number of women lawyers in the present day is an indicator of the modification of legal and cultural barriers to ensure a gender-inclusive judiciary. Leila Seth may be well recognized as the motivating force that has encouraged many others to brave ideological hostilities and carve a space for themselves as individuals.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Flavia Agnes' *Women and Law in India: An Omnibus* (2006), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (2006), and Lata Mani's *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (1998).
- <sup>2</sup> The prohibition of *sati* (1829) was heralded as a key step forward for women's emancipation in modern India, Mani argues that victims were marginal to the debate and that the controversy was more over the definitions of Hindu tradition, the importance of ritual in religious worship, the civilizing missions of colonialism, and the role of the colonial state. The paradox in the history of *sati* lies in the fact that while the debate centered on the religious basis of *sati* and the fine points of scriptural interpretation, the testimonials of victims consistently addressed the hardships and societal expectations attached to widowhood.
- <sup>3</sup> Interestingly, despite the internalization of the modernizing prospects of education and equal rights for women, the state (read legal codes) sought to confine her in the traditional role of the *bhadramahila* in order to retain the indigeneness of the nation.



- <sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that despite her education and success Leila never wanted to pursue a career. Her dream of the nursery school underlines the realization of her position as a woman who should remain in the confines of the traditional spheres of domesticity and maternity.
- <sup>5</sup> I use the word "maternal" instead of "paternal" here to indicate the larger community of womanhood whose lives are codified by patriarchy.

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# THE SPHOTA THEORY IN INDIAN GRAMMATICAL TRADITION AND THE NOTION OF LANGUAGE FACULTY IN THE GENERATIVE PARADIGM: AN INTROSPECTION

*Hemanga Dutta*

**ABSTRACT.** *The notion of "language faculty" is an important concept in generative grammar. Chomsky's critique on stimulus response theory heralds a dawn of revolution in the realm of linguistic inquiry on human cognition which further paves the way for an introspection upholding the claim that the entity called language is not only an amalgamate of structure conditioned by phonology, morphology and syntax or a means through which one communicates one's thoughts but the manifestation of cognitive propensities of the human mind/brain triggered by biological compulsions. The chomskyan internalist interpretation of human language faculty brings linguistics closer to the domains of psychology and biology and distances from the dominant philosophical trends of that age which have concentrated on language as a public construct of which individuals have partial knowledge. However, what the cognitivists termed as language faculty can be traced back to a concept in Indian Grammatical tradition that is, the sphota theory popularised mainly by Bhartrihari and Patanjali. The sphotavada claims that word exist before it is articulated; it is in the mind of the speaker and the hearer. During the moment of articulation the word gets manifested. In the same way the concept of language faculty which gained prominence under the patronage of Chomsky is concerned with the internalist interpretation of language as a biological object not with the individual languages such as Hindi, Assamese, English etc. An attempt has been made in this paper to make a correlation between the connotations underlying the concept of sphota and the specific properties required for defining the internalist interpretation of language faculty.*

*Keywords:* Sphota theory, sphotavada, Chomskyan internalist interpretation, dhvani, linguistic community, cognitivism, language organ.

## 1.0 Sphota theory and its diverse interpretation:

The etymological meaning of sphota has been enumerated by different scholars in different ways. According to Nageshabhatta the word has been derived

from the root "sphut" which means "to burst". The derivative meaning of sphota, therefore, is that from which meaning bursts forth, i.e. revealed. In Sarvadarshanasangraha the term sphota has been given a new etymological interpretation by Madhava by saying bursts means "what is made explicit". Thus the sphota is what, in being itself revealed by letters or sounds, conveys the meaning to the hearer. John Brough is of the view that the sphota is simply the linguistic sign in its aspect of meaning bearer. Panini's monumental work Astadhyayi records no evidence of sphota except an enigmatic reference to an early grammarian by the name of Sphotayana in rule 6.1.123 'avan sphotayanasya'. In the same fashion Yaska ascribed the concept of sphota to Audumbarayana according to whom 'indriya nityavnvacanam' (speech or language is inherent in the faculties). The sentence as a linguistic unit resides in the mental faculty of the language users, the speaker and the hearer. Patanjali attributes the term sabda for sphota to which the dhvani or sound is assigned as a feature. The noisy part of the sound or dhvani can be short or long or soft or loud but what remains constant is sphota, unaffected by the individualities of individual speakers. In fact Patanjali draws a line of demarcation between two aspects of the word, the sphota and the dhvani; the former is characterized by permanence and the latter is actualised and ephemeral element and an attribute of the former. It is evident from the lines of Mahabhashya:

- (1) *"dhwanih sphotas ca sabdanam dhwani tu khalu lakshyate  
alpo mahatmas ca kesamicid ubhayam tat svabhavatah"*

These concepts have bearing upon the subsequent concepts of prakrit dhvani and vaikrit dhvani developed by the later grammarians. This distinction between prakrit vs. vaikrit dhvani is best illustrated in the Vakyapadya of Bhartrihari (1.77):

- (2) *"varanasya grabane hetuh prakrto dhwanih isyate.  
vrttibhede nimittatvam vaikritah prtipadyate."*

However, Patanjali's views can be differentiated from the later grammarians as he does not consider sphota as a part less entity or a single indivisible symbol bearing a specific meaning but the unchanging sound unit or a time series pattern of such units. Hence sphota in Patanjali's framework has a fixed temporal dimension determined by the number of units. Patanjali seems to have been influenced by the philosophy of Mimamsa when he talks about the permanent nature of varna. The Mimamsa philosophy assumes that the permanent sound units should be distinguished from the actual instances of their utterances. When uttered the quality of being fast, medium or slow will be perceived but such variations are not the components of the permanent sound units. The sounds that are produced or heard by agents are only means of revealing the permanent sound units. However the sphota doctrine has mostly been associated with Bhartrhari who, according to M. Biarreau, has given a linguistic treatment of

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this concept. I am going to discuss the concept of sphota in the framework of Bhartrhari in the next section of this paper.

## 2.0 The sphota theory and Bhartrhari's Vakyapadiya:

In Vakyapadiya the sphota has been treated as part less indivisible entity which is devoid of internal sequence. Sphota in the analysis of Bhartrhari has emerged as the real substratum, proper linguistic unit which is also identical with its meaning. According to this philosopher language anchors thought and vice versa and hence it is incorrect to ask whether sphota is or not the meaning bearing speech unit in Bhartrhari's system. Bhartrhari says a word consists of two parts: one is the underlying cause of the articulated sounds, while the other is attached with meanings. The following is the verse from Vakyapadiya which provides a precise explanation of the essence of sphota

- (1) (vakyapadiya I. 44):  
*"dvan upadanasabdesbu sabdau sabdavidu viduh  
 eko nimittam sabdanam aparo rthe prayujyate."*

In simple terminology a word is endowed with two properties: swarup and artha. The underlying cause of the articulated sounds (sabdanimittam) is the sound pattern or the swarup which underlies the instances of the sounds in utterances. This abstract entity with time sequence attached to is called the prakrt dhvani and is external aspect of the language whereas the internal component of a word which is attached with the meaning is sphota which is indivisible and integral linguistic symbol. This final dichotomy between form and language can be traced back to Panini<sup>2</sup> who says that a word which is not a technical term denotes its own form. In the same fashion, Katyayana says the understanding of the thing meant is preceded by that of the word and therefore, in the grammatical context the question of the thing meant does not arise. So a word has the potential to signify its own form as well as the meaning. The notion of double power associated with a word has been emphasised by Bhartrhari through various illustrations. A word can convey an idea of the form and also reveal other things. In his words a word is like a lamp which reveals itself and its surrounding. According to Bhartrhari words are physical entities which manifest themselves through the medium of articulate sounds as said in the karika 46 of Vakyapadya:

- (2) '*sabdo pi buddhisthab srutinam karanam prthak*'

In this context what A.H. Gardiner in 'Speech and language' says is relevant: "it is only inaccurately, though by a sort of necessary inaccuracy, that the name of 'words' is given to the articulate sounds which pass between speaker and listener. As words exist in the possession of every individual of a linguistic community, they are physical entities, comprising on the one hand an area of meaning, and on the other hand the image of a particular sound susceptible of being physically reproduced whenever wanted." Even earlier thinkers in the Indian grammatical

tradition draw a resolution that words are something more than the audible sounds uttered by the speaker and heard by the listener. As for instance, Vyasa in *Yogasutrabhasya* claims that a word has to be grasped in the cognition of the hearer although it is brought together by the sounds. The concept of *sphota* is replete with the connotations something more than what is implied by the term linguistic sign. *Sphota* must be assigned a meaning component without which it bears no existence. In fact *sphota* can be acclaimed as a significant in Saussurean terminology taken as time less indivisible symbol denoting a meaning. *Sphota* is the basic premise of Bhartrhari's monistic and idealistic metaphysical theory according to which the essence of the whole universe is speech- *śabda brahma*, the energy principle as evident in the first *karika* of *Vakyapadiya*:

- (3) *'anadinidhanan brahma śabdātātvaṃ yad aksaram  
vivartate 'rbhavena prakriyajagoto yatah'*

This speech essence, which is the ultimate reality and is the nature of the consciousness, has neither beginning nor end and is not susceptible to change, but on the basis of various powers such as Time, this phenomenal world appears to be evolutionary and pluralistic. The speech principle, according to Bhartrhari, undergoes three stages in the course of its manifestation: *pasyanti*, *madhyama* and *vaikhari*. Bhartrhari believes that the nature of the self is nothing but synonymous with the nature of the language thought. This stage of complete identity of language and thought is *pasyanti* stage of language. Before the proper articulation of sound sequence or utterance there is one more intermediary stage, that is *madhyama* *vak*, where the language and thought it conveys still are one and undifferentiated, but at this pre verbal stage the speaker sees them as differentiable. The speaker recognizes the verbal part, which he is about to verbalize either to himself or another, as separable from the *artha* and this perception impels him to speech which results in the *nada sphota* differentiation.

Now a question arises what is the relation existing between *nada* and *sphota*. According to Bhartrhari it is the *nada* through the medium of which *sphota* gets its manifestation and *sphota* conveys the meaning. The *sphota* is an indivisible unit, a part less, sequence less whole, which is connected with the verbal dispositional ability of the speaker and hearer. It is actualised through the medium of *nada* which adheres to the principle of sequence in sound elements. Thus the *sphota* appears to have parts and temporal sequences just as the moon reflected in wanly waters appears to be disintegrated.

### 3.0 Cognitivism and Chomskyan notion of language faculty:

Cognitivism which flourished in the realm of linguistics in 1950s discards the notion of stimulus response theory given by B.F. Skinner and claims that learning depends on insight formation and perception. The cognitive perspective regards behaviour and its products not as the object of inquiry, but as data that may provide evidence about the inner mechanism of mind. The approach adopted

is mentalist which is conceived as mechanical, chemical operations gradually integrated with the environment and recognized at the time when the use of finite means." The same conclusion. Every child and general intelligence is functional through the experience reveals that from the experience has provided stimulus, that is, language part of a child to arrive at the main question is how children proposed a "principles paradigm" a first step towards the essential language (Chomsky, 1985) conditions specified by the man's biological endowment. Whereas the parameters which account for the diversity and null subject are two different one another. From the only culturally transmitted genetically programmed. In the human brain/mind language faculty. Chomsky regarded as a 'language organ' system, immune system, and organ is an expression of and cognition remains a constant

### 4.0 Language faculty and

Although both the theories to establish a correlation from the philosophical perspective by Chomsky is replete with the part less indivisible essential through the medium of *nada* *sphota* is abstract entity. It is a particular specific language. Each language is the result of course of experience. The innate (LAD) that takes experience is internally represented in

is mentalist which is concerned with the mental aspects which stand alongside its mechanical, chemical optical and other aspects and thus linguistic study has been gradually integrated with the biological sciences. The cognitive revolution was recognized at the time when it was established that language involves "the infinite use of finite means." The data from language acquisition studies also leads to the same conclusion. Every child of normal brain function regardless of race, culture and general intelligence is equipped with universal grammar which becomes functional through the medium of linguistic input. A careful interpretation of experience reveals that from the earliest stages, the child knows vastly more than the experience has provided. It can be supported by the evidence of poverty of stimulus, that is, language input is degenerate, inadequate and meagre on the part of a child to arrive at well formed novel utterances. Lightfoot says, "The main question is how children learn more than they experience." Chomsky proposed a "principles parameters" model of language acquisition, which provides a first step towards the establishment of the genetic basis of grammar of human language (Chomsky, 1981, 1986, 1988a, 1993, 2000). The principles refer to conditions specified by the linguist's theory of universal grammar and are part of man's biological endowment, Bauplan (biological plant) for human language. Whereas the parameters are the variables left open in the statement of principles which account for the diversity of human languages. As for example headedness and null subject are two parameters on the basis of which languages vary from one another. From the above discussion it is clear that human language is not only culturally transmitted for the performance of social transactions but also genetically programmed. The cognitivists are of the view that there is a component in the human brain/mind which is responsible for the human language known as language faculty. Chomsky argues that the faculty of language can reasonably be regarded as a 'language organ' in the sense in which scientists talk about visual system, immune system, articulatory system etc. The basic character of language organ is an expression of the genes although the relation existing between genes and cognition remains a distant prospect for inquiry.

#### 4.0 Language faculty and sphota :

Although both the concepts are distant in time and orientation it is possible to establish a correlation between them. Bhartrhari has interpreted sphota from the philosophical perspective whereas the notion of language faculty as enunciated by Chomsky is replete with Neuro cognitive dimension. Sphota is used to denote the part less indivisible entity devoid of sequence which gets its manifestation through the medium of nada. Whereas nada has a temporal physical dimension sphota is abstract entity. In the same way language faculty is not concerned with a particular specific language but is intrinsically related with human cognition. Each language is the result of the interplay of two factors: the initial state and the course of experience. The initial state can be treated as language acquisition device (LAD) that takes experience as input and gives language as output-an output that is internally represented in the human brain/mind. Sphota in Bhartrhari's analysis

has emerged as the real substratum and proper linguistic unit which is identical with the meaning it conveys. It has nothing to do with the external shape of the linguistic element as it is the domain of nada and vaikrta dhvani. The sphotavada claims that word exist before it is articulated; it is in the mind of the speaker and the hearer. During the moment of articulation the word gets manifested. According to Bhartrhari, a word can convey an idea of the form of an expression in addition to its content. In the same way the concept of language faculty which gained prominence under the patronage of Chomsky and Lyle Jenkins etc is concerned with the internalist interpretation of language as a biological object not with the individual languages such as Hindi, Assamese, English etc. It is the parametric setting which is responsible for the diversity of human languages but as far as the initial state and the principles model of human language faculty are concerned there is no marked difference. Each and every child is endowed with the same language faculty which gets operationalised through the linguistic input from external languages just like the sphota which reveals its essence in the form of nada.

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## LOCATING I CONFLICT, POLITICS OF B

**ABSTRACT.** *This paper state in the northeast of I three decades. The ninetic violence in Assam leading boundaries turning the far suspicion and hostility. As of the Indian subcontinent by idioms of separatism a native cultural attributes. coexisting peacefully for a now fissured by faultlines of groups that are increasingly the problematic of shifting conflict. I argue that a coll overtaken by staccato impre and alienation. Notions ab in the community, neighbor figure in the popular imagin and an emerging tribalism and the other and the idea of the autonomously admin hills of Karbi Anglong in As decade articulate dominan distinct from the Assamese u and perceived oneness. My f a postnational world and at as evidenced from the Karb.*

## LOCATING IDENTITIES AND OTHERNESS: CONFLICT, REPRESENTATION AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN NORTHEAST INDIA

*Rakhee Kalita Moral*

**ABSTRACT.** *This paper seeks to understand changing social identities in Assam, a state in the northeast of India that has been under the grip of insurgency for the past three decades. The nineties witnessed an unprecedented rise of insurgent politics and violence in Assam leading to marked social realignments and the redrawing of cultural boundaries turning the familiar spaces of civility and friendship into uncertain zones of suspicion and hostility. A strategic space in the geopolitical contours of the eastern board of the Indian subcontinent, Assam is today in the national imaginary recognised more by idioms of separatism and identity violence than by its natural endowments and native cultural attributes. Ethnically and linguistically plural with several communities coexisting peacefully for a very long time the multicultural structures of this society are now fissured by faultlines splitting Assam's body politic severely into tribes and indigenous groups that are increasingly isolated from each other. The first section of my paper addresses the problematic of shifting identities in multicultural Assamese society in the time of conflict. I argue that a collective memory of culture and hospitality in Assam has been overtaken by staccato impressions of rupture in a social matrix that engenders 'otherness' and alienation. Notions about legitimacy of social membership and of outsider categories in the community, neighbourhood or professional spheres are pronounced and commonly figure in the popular imagination that imbricate the larger political culture of hegemony and an emerging tribalism thereof. In exploring the uneasy encounters between the self and the other and the idea of belonging in the second section of my paper, I cite the case of the autonomously administered Karbi people, dwelling mostly in the southeastern hills of Karbi Anglong in Assam, whose literary and cultural representations over the last decade articulate dominant motifs of difference in their claims for an ethnic entity distinct from the Assamese who earlier sought to subsume them under a larger inclusivity and perceived oneness. My paper interrogates the privileging of the monolithic society in a postnational world and attempts to explain the validity of multicultural heterogeneity as evidenced from the Karbi example.*



*Keywords: Identity, difference, tribalism, monolithic society, nationalism, otherness, representation, ethno-nationalism.*

In a recent demonstration of sartorial politics, Rongbong Terang, educationist and writer, and president of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, the apex literary society of the state of Assam in the northeastern region of India, had to leave the venue of a cultural festival in Upper Assam without delivering his chief guest's address.<sup>1</sup> The reason was apparently trivial — all about the choice of formal clothing at the meeting — but disturbingly so. The organisers of the event prescribed for Terang the "national" Assamese dress code consisting of the *dboti* and *kurta*, a traditional male attire not extensively worn now, and unfavoured by the writer, which assumed a rather pertinent if prickly concern for the local committee resulting in an embarrassing turn of events leading to his exit from the convention that afternoon. It is perhaps more than significant that Terang happens to be a Karbi, one of the major hill tribes among the many ethnic groups that live predominantly in the southeastern district of Karbi Anglong in Assam.<sup>2</sup> While the parleys and instant negotiations (as reported meticulously in the local press) following the confusion over the dress-code between the invited guest and the organisers seemed to suggest that the moment was ill managed the subtexts reveal a more vexing reality about the state of identities and the politics of belonging in the polyethnic and multicultural societies of present-day Assam.<sup>3</sup>

A strategically located state in the north eastern corner of India, Assam underwent major political and demographic reconstitution when in the period between the sixties and seventies some of its hill districts were granted separate statehood and broke away from it. Many of these like Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, now all 'hill states', are inhabited by tribes who had earlier been naturally accommodated in the erstwhile undivided state and formed a vital part of Assamese culture and history. The colonial administration's method of scheduling what they considered peripheral areas from the mainland of Assam during their annexation of the province is integrally linked to the granting of status such as "scheduled tribe" to the people who inhabited these areas. The scheduling of the tribal communities in Assam came to be related thus, as noted by an observer "in a way strangely reminiscent of the colonial rationale, as much to the classic requirements that defined a community as a tribe (economic and social backwardness, remoteness and difficulty of access of the habitat and such things) as to the scheduling of whole areas, once classified as Excluded and Partially Excluded"<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, a hierarchical structure of society emerged, dividing the plains and hills of the region notionally to such an extent that certain areas came to be designated "tribal lands" with their own set of laws further alienating the people of the hills from their counterparts in the plain, both behaviourally and psychologically.

The idea of respect for communities and/or social harmony is thus, already and inherently encoded into the hermeneutics of conduct of their constituent individuals and a *performative* act such as Rongbong Terang's is easily read in terms of the "fulfilment or violations of social, ceremonial or ritual expectations",

and often independently emboldened to make somewhat misplaced realisations about the incident referred to. This is a region in the northeast of India and elsewhere in the era perceived as that of decolonisation and the birth of the nation. It is located in its homogenous assumption that 'difference' is inconsequential, as it were, and imaginary were dictated by deterrents in the road to independence. Jawaharlal Nehru's blunt policy of 'leave them be left alone and much to do with the constitutional policy of centralisation really recovered. Further, the spatial history of the region of the plains and his brethren went back and forth among them. A long drawn struggle for the rights of the groups of the Tibeto Burmese before Indian independence subsequently undermined the unity.<sup>5</sup> Despite an ancient Indian civilisation the stratification of faultlines that lay dormant since separatist struggles began.

Nowhere is this cleavage between the hills people or tribes of the hills and the plainsmen. People present in Assam, are unequal in the valley in terms of political education and economic development festering for several years that sharply divides the state relationship, for instance, as of an Assamese nationalism in the century new intellectual vanguard the earliest of the educated vanguard to recall how the leader "discovered the big idea of an India that It is perhaps not without relevance in reconstructing the Karbi need of a community face imagined a political commu-

and often independently of the actual intentions or desires of the actor.<sup>5</sup> I am emboldened to make such a claim in the light of the strongly emotional and somewhat misplaced reactions of a section of Assamese society to the particular incident referred to. This brings us then to what is commonly addressed in the northeast of India and elsewhere in the country as the 'tribal question' even in the era perceived as that of democratic pluralism. In the post independent dispensation of the birth of the nation, India's unity and integrity was often sought to be located in its homogeneous peoples mingling across the country with the assumption that 'different' people be pushed back to the peripheries and made inconsequential, as it were. Attempts to render them invisible in the national imaginary were dictated by the nationalists' fear that they may become ugly deterrents in the road to capital and progress. The first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's blunt if lopsided contention that the tribals of the northeast be left alone and much to their own devices was cosmetically translated into a constitutional policy of categorisation from which the Indian polity has never really recovered. Further, this political practice irreparably created a schism in the spatial history of the region artificially drawing boundaries between the dweller of the plains and his brethren of the hills although there has been a steady flow back and forth among them in their natural and historical processes of coexistence. A long drawn struggle for autonomy by the Nagas, a community of various ethnic groups of the Tibeto Burman family to the far south of Assam, for instance, before Indian independence was perceived as a threat to the nation-state and subsequently undermined by the national leadership's aspiration for monolithic unity.<sup>6</sup> Despite an ancient tradition of a plural society characterising the great Indian civilisation the strange politics of territory and control led to the emergence of faultlines that lay dormant until more recent times when secessionist and separatist struggles began to increasingly sweep the northeast.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the contemporary unease with which the hills people or tribes of Assam approach questions of 'oneness' and solidarity with the plainsmen. People in Karbi Anglong, one of the two hills districts of present Assam, are unequivocal about their separateness from the Assamese of the valley in terms of political power, privileges, representations, ethnography, education and economic development. Current conflicts in Karbi Anglong festering for several years now have exacerbated this sense of growing alienation that sharply divides the state. In an interesting recent analysis of Karbi Assamese relationship, for instance, and one that adds sufficient complexity to the stereotype of an Assamese nationalism supposedly responsible for much of the early twentieth century new intellectual wave in Assam, the figure of Semsoning Ingti, one of the earliest of the educated visionaries of the Karbi community, has been resurrected to recall how the leader "dared to merge his little idea of a Karbi homeland with the big idea of an India that was struggling to free itself from colonial subjugation"<sup>7</sup>. It is perhaps not without relevance that the writer of this fragment, also a historian reconstructing the Karbi past, in a newly launched website evokes the urgent need of a community facing 'amnesia' to remember this lone nationalist who imagined a political community for the Karbis and their unity. In the creation of

separate states for the hills the people of Karbi Anglong however remained without agency as its demand for a homeland was hardly ameliorated by the bewildering choices it faced: of joining Meghalaya, becoming an autonomous state or being part of Assam. Obviously the Karbis rue their political destiny consequent upon their decision to stay on as a district (with an autonomous council) of Assam if the present day state of affairs in the hill region is any indication.

I wish to advance the idea of a recurrent fragmentation of the diverse communities that lies at the heart of the skewed social matrix of Assam's contemporary culture. Clearly, the romance of the nation has outlived its uses and in the new dispensation of segregation attended by an increasingly suspicious climate of awkward coexistence, tribes and communities have disbanded from a monolithic Assam into their own little exclusive enclaves, loudly demanding separateness from each other. The somewhat fragile idea of friendship between the self and the other is now seen to surface in altered terms as an older Assamese hospitality towards or even subtle patronisation of the Karbi or for that matter of other ethnic groups is now fraught and involves control of the alterity of the other in a manner not unlike the famous postulation by Jacques Derrida that relationships of hospitality are embedded in a colonial structure in which there is always a master; someone who is a host and thus hospitality is always conditional.<sup>8</sup> Thus the ideal connotations of the state of friendship already, if mistakenly, perceived in the nation state's reconfiguration of peoples and territories suffer inevitable erosion in the actual impossibility of its experience. Consequently, the friend is rendered elusive and the older notion of oneness comes under challenge. The possibility of an ideal, and, therefore by Derridean construction, an 'unconditional hospitality' is arguably impossible. My position on this is somewhat, if slightly, different. I see the toll of damaged relationships being shared sometimes by those who witness these transitions, societal, professional and personal. For generations who collectively respond to societies-in-conflict there is always aspiration for harmony, for forgiveness of past mistakes and hospitality. I therefore argue that in spaces that are altered often irreparably by circumstances, historical, political and cultural, the need to question is evoked sometimes by the consciously ethical belief in openness and tolerance, but for the most part, unconsciously in the availability of an assured return to pre-conflict civility. The violence that history subjects the memories of citizens of nation-states to is, I imagine, sought to be undone at times by imagining a reversed history and by even accepting collective responsibility perhaps for the hostility of one community towards the other. Most of these acts of contemporary society underpin a sociological imagination that is as Zygmunt Bauman observes,

"a simultaneous reciprocal translation between private and public stories: a translation of the individually faced and privately tackled problems into public, collectively confronted issues and of public interests into the individually pursued life strategies". (123-141)

To be sure, these are, however tenuous, signs of an ethical stance and, more precisely, point to the existence of an ethics for social relations, at once individual and of the community.<sup>9</sup>

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Comparative responses from other sets of binaries, such as the Bodo or Mishing vis-a-vis the Assamese, (both plains tribes) or say with respect to the Nagas, Khasis and Nepalese, among others, all reveal different stages of identity crisis and positions in terms of boundaries of belonging.<sup>10</sup> It is against such a background that locating the selfhood of ethnic peoples and their politics and poetics of belonging assumes vital significance.

## II

In his widely acclaimed *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha has catalogued the many impulses and instincts that shape the destinies of peoples, among others, "the *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other; the comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order..." (1990: Introduction). It is often, the attempt to find oneself in the perspective of the one who is different from the self and, more important, the frustrating unknowability of the other that sometimes determine the social belonging of communities in a space of ideally imagined homogeneity. The nation then is always already postnational: surging relentlessly toward an expression of the independence of its various groups and an emergent exclusionism whose downside smacks of a flagrant hatred by dominant communities of those perceived as the Other, even as the multicultural ethos of plurality and liberalism notionally fights the ethnic nation.<sup>11</sup> The claims of multiculturalism are therefore Janus-faced, asserting cultural difference simultaneously with a shared sameness amongst contiguous societies that aspire for self determination.

Recent killings in Assam's Karbi Anglong district threaten to assume the nature of a xenophobic rage which turns tribe against tribe and community against community.<sup>12</sup> The growing Karbi resentment at the apathy of the state largely understood as being led by the Assamese who head the bureaucracy and dominant political groups in Assam is being written into the contemporary cultural and literary forms. While the Karbis have demonstrated great skill in their long tradition of oral historiography celebrating a cultural life teeming in a rich diversity of lore, myth and the performed cultures, recent attitudes to the problem of identity and the plea for a homeland articulate themselves in a consciously political rhetoric that is common to most writings and representations seen as relevant to the present context. The Karbi Students' Association (KSA) a prominent organisation fielding noted political leaders and Karbi nationalists in the past to the cause of Karbi autonomy is particularly unambivalent in its mouthpiece, *Klirdap* (The Morning Star).<sup>13</sup> The *Karbi Lammet Amei* (Karbi Literary Club) established in 1966 and the Karbi Cultural Society founded in 1976 extended in these crucial times a mobility and expanse not realised earlier. This was the year that also saw the Roman script being adopted for the Karbi language in place of the Assamese one, a demand made by the Karbis in tandem with its larger aspiration for political autonomy. Yet, it is no accident that the most heard voices of the Karbi people belong to a small but significant body of writers, poets, grammarians and folklorists

who continue to write mostly in Assamese (something they have habitually done) for it is also their way of talking back to their neighbours from the plains. Rongbong Terang, arguably, the most celebrated of the Karbi litterateurs is someone whose novels adorn the bookshelves of every fiction-reading Assamese.<sup>14</sup> The effortless ease with which Terang straddles the twin worlds of hills and plains in his fiction, of the Karbi and the Assamese, belies the complexed social relations that have overtaken the simpler coexistences of the past. While it may be pertinent to question here the validity of representations somewhat innocent of the deeper vexing issues of multiculturalism, or of the failure of 'recognition' of the other, of misplaced anger and thus of perpetrating violence, it is perhaps equally vital to address the responsibility of the artist in attempting to bridge the divides of culture despite the contentious claims of a self-reflexive multicultural society.<sup>15</sup> The self and the other in this case, attended by the counter claims of sharing in and resistance to the other, need to realign their goals in a terrain where these imperatives can negotiate with each other to arrive at new possibilities of being and belonging.

Yet it is not difficult to imagine how literature and literary representations may sometimes occupy an ethical space by not seeking to know final answers. For every emotional and cultural space may not find its corresponding set of cognate inhabitants who will share, empathise and understand: something that the trajectory of Karbi-Assamese relations demonstrates in its beleaguering attempts to come to terms with difference and sameness. As a sociologist observes, sensitive literary exercises are thus attended by an "ethics of hospitality (that) consists in leaving unresolved questions of ownership and belonging, and in its invitation to share in this suspension of knowledge".<sup>16</sup> Perhaps writers are sometimes guilty of the partaking of "partial truths" that colonial historians and ethnographers have fed generations of peoples of this multicultural region with: for the history of tribal peoples is often also a denial of difference as much as it is a construction of the other.<sup>17</sup> Such erasure of difference has evidently taken a heavy toll on the idea of who the 'tribal' is and in the present dispensation the need to retrieve the self and selfhood of communities is thus witnessed by a jerky assertion of communitarianism through political formations and other demonstrations, often not fully understood by those who subscribe to it.

I argue that the new cultures of post-national freedom accommodate better the boundary-less habitats of the global person and may help turn the northeast's zones of ethnic mistrust into plural spaces of cooperation. The multicultural is anywhere and everywhere, and the old instinct of seeking to homogenise differences is a futile exercise. If recent narratives of Karbi history or of literary representations are to be analysed then the cultural dichotomies with the Assamese are no longer sharper; only more confident in their difference. In the matter of borrowing of culture, bright and bold motifs in the Karbi traditional petticoat worn customarily as a dress by women (called *pini*), for instance, have substituted the earlier dull designs and are today more ubiquitous among the young in Assam. If this is attributed to the exigencies of fashion alone, we are likely to miss the symbolic import of a self expression that requires no apology. Further, the Assamese woman's

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I therefore believe t Assamese ambit of trans: colonial history and the r Evident elsewhere in this paradigms of sharing and: and Karbis, the Khasis an other sets of peoples and r documented than the fact: in the media, social netwo is this availability that is p in the time of crisis, and wh of societies faced by a diffi our contemporary times.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Asom Sahitya Akademi was established and convenes meetings annually, as early as in 1917. It publishes journals, steers and mobilises literary activities, and publishes literatures and histories. It also holds annual agrarian fairs in various districts which the government sponsors.
- <sup>2</sup> The Karbis, formerly known as the 'Burman tribes of the plains', are one of the 'scheduled tribes' of Assam. See, *Gazetteer of Assam*, 1907, districts. (ed) K.N. Panikar. The Mikir Hills sub-division, which constituted out of the United Khasi and Jaintia hills, was then merged with the United Khasi and Jaintia hills to bring the

easy choice of donning a pini like skirt or a Dimasa wrap and wearing the traditions of her hills-neighbour on her sleeve as a shared north-eastern cultural code surely indicates, however slightly, the crossing of boundaries and the shifting of identities in multicultural Assam. This in my view is not in the same category as what has been often recognised as Europe's fascination with the exotic 'other'. Rather it seems to be more in tune with multiculturalism's quintessentially enabling ideas that are central to, and therefore available within, the practice of the disciplines of aesthetics, art and literary history.

I therefore believe that there is a widening space available in the Karbi-Assamese ambit of transactions that transcends the discontents issuing out of colonial history and the recent politics of identity, ethnic claims and belonging. Evident elsewhere in this polyethnic zone are curious and often paradoxical paradigms of sharing and syncretism, say among Manipuris and Nagas, the Khasis and Karbis, the Khasis and Jaintias, the Assamese and the Bodos, among many other sets of peoples and neighbourly communities that are less talked about and documented than the fact of division and disintegration that is so widely circulated in the media, social networks and in the mindscapes of the northeast of India. It is this availability that is proof of an ethics of responsibility and hospitality even in the time of crisis, and which, more importantly, redeems the despair and hostility of societies faced by a difficult history and the painful experience of transition in our contemporary times.

This paper is a modified version of a presentation made by the author at an international conference on *Multiculturalism, Conflict and Belonging* at Mansfield College, Oxford University in September 2009. The conference is part of the *Diversity and Recognition* global research project of Interdisciplinary.Net of Oxford, UK.

#### Notes

- 1 The Asom Sahitya Sabha is the official literary body of the state of Assam and convenes massive annual events, the first of these meets being held as early as in 1917. Claiming to be a non partisan, non-political organization, it steers and mobilizes popular public opinion and debates on the art, culture, literatures and history of the people of Assam. The event referred to is an annual agrarian festival, *Phat Bihu*, celebrated in May in the upper Assam districts which themselves have a fair share of 'tribal' and ethnic population.
- 2 The Karbis, formerly called the Mikirs, neighbours of the Assamese of the plains, are one of the more numerous and homogeneous of the many Tibeto Burman tribes living in Assam. They have been accorded the status of a 'scheduled tribe' under the Constitution of India. See, *Gazetteer of India. Assam State. United Mikir and North Cachar Hills districts.* (ed) K.N.Dutt. Government of Assam. Gauhati. 1979. "The erstwhile Mikir Hills subdivision which now constitute the Karbi Anglong was constituted out of the Partially Excluded areas of the district of Sibsagar and Nowgong, then known as the Mikir Hills Tracts and the Bhoi area of the United Khasi and Jaintai Hills predominantly inhabited by the Karbis with a view to bring the hitherto scattered people under one administration for their

all round development" (p.2).

See *The Karbis*, (1908) From the papers of Edward Stack (ed) Sir Charles Lyall. New Delhi. Spectrum Publications. See also, *People of India: Assam* Vol XV Part 1 (eds) BK Bordoloi and RK Athpuria. Archaeological Survey of India. Kolkata. Seagull Books. 2003 (pp.373-379)

- <sup>3</sup> In Assam, the state empowered Karbi Anglong and the adjoining North Cachar Hills as autonomous councils under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of The Constitution of India in 1995, following a long and growing demand for statehood for the Karbis by the region's dominant political party, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Karbi Anglong.

For a critical background to the cultural politics of Assam and its people, see Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself. Assam and the Politics of Nationality*. Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania Press. 1999

- <sup>4</sup> M.S. Prabhakara, "In the Name of Tribal Identities" *Frontline* Vol 22. No 24 Nov 19-Dec 2 (2005)

- <sup>5</sup> See for an elaborate discussion of identity in multicultural contexts, Colin Bird, "Status, Identity and Respect" *Political Theory* Vol 32 No.2 (2004) pp. 207-232. Bird pits the liberal notion of 'equal respect' for others against the multiculturalists' respect for 'difference' and makes claims for a pluralist world where the idea of identity is not always bound up with the question of status and respect and may exist on independent terms.

- <sup>66</sup> Udayon Misra, *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation state in Assam and Nagaland*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study Simla. 1999

- <sup>7</sup> Dharamsing Teron, "A Tribute to Semsoning Ingti: Father of Karbi Nationalism" 2009 <http://www.karbi.wordpress.com> (Accessed on 1.6.09).. This piece on the "Father" and "Founder" of Karbi Nationalism and several such other write ups now available in the public domain recreate Karbi ethnography, history and polity in an attempt to trace the genesis and sociology of a community that has remained in the shadow of its larger and more visible neighbours, the Assamese.

- <sup>8</sup> See, *J Derrida, Of Hospitality* (Translated by Rachael Bowlby) Stanford University Press. 2000

It may also help to recall here the Derridean theory of 'friendship' wherein, Derrida cites the primal "friendship prior to friendships, ineffaceable, fundamental, bottomless.... of a being-together" unavailable in the present. See also *J Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship" The Journal of Philosophy*. Vol 85. No 11: 1988, pp 632-644

It is interesting to compare this with Hannah Arendt's notion of friendship, often commented upon by social thinkers, which signifies a companionship, necessarily political, with others as equal partners in a community common to them. In *Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics" Social Research* 57, 1990, pp 83-84

- <sup>9</sup> I write this from my own experience in recent months with acquaintances and strangers alike, from Karbi Anglong who flooded me with instinctive and ready responses to queries about their society and the reasons behind our presently frayed social fabric. Their honest and genuine need to speak about our shared predicament indicates the availability of an ethics of responsibility that I am arguing for.

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See, Zygmunt Bauman, "Chasing Elusive Society". *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, No 18: 2005, p.123-141

- <sup>10</sup> The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of problems relating to these separate ethnic clusters of people sharing neighbourly relations within and immediately outside Assam. Among the other prominent tribal groups cohabiting with the Assamese are the Bodos, the Mishings, the Dimasas, Kacharis, the Deuris, the Rabhas, Tiwas and Garos, while the Khasis dominantly stay in Meghalaya and the Nagas in Nagaland, both of which are separate linguistic hill states formed out of the erstwhile undivided Assam. Nepalese people are however scattered all over Assam and also in the adjoining hill states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. See *People of India: Assam Vol XV*, op.cit.,
- <sup>11</sup> In, *Multiculturalism, Liberalism and Democracy*(eds) Rajeev Bhargava, Amiya Bagchi, R Sudarshan(1999) Oxford University Press,2008, the ethnic nation is observed as being distinguished by a political cadreship based on " cultural and emotional links and where cultural difference and the corresponding lack of warmth it induces becomes reason for excluding people from membership in a political community." (24)
- <sup>12</sup> In the past four years, Karbi Anglong, among other adjoining areas of the region, has been witness to such hate exercises, with regular torching of entire villages of one tribe by another and even hacking to death of innocent countryfolk in what has come to be seen as an ethnic cleansing mission in the northeast of India.
- <sup>13</sup> The Karbi Students' Association was formed on 21 July, 1959 and within five years in 1964 *Karbi Riso Adorbar* or Karbi Youth Association was constituted. Between these two major organizations, the new political and cultural imagination of the progressive young minds of the community found its voice in articulating the aspiration for autonomy and a separate Karbi identity.
- <sup>14</sup> Rongbong Terang's *Rongmilir Hanbi* (1984) which remains one of the most widely read novels in Assamese, is about the Karbis and their simple agrarian lives suddenly disturbed by the invading cunning and capital of the plains. Terang's novel, however, endures for his human story transcending borders and all differences.
- <sup>15</sup> Obviously, Charles Taylor's famous thesis that our identity is shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the "misrecognition" of others is the point of reference from where the present argument builds. See, Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition"*(ed) Amy Gutmann. Princeton University Press.1996
- <sup>16</sup> Colin Davis, "The Cost of Being Ethical: Fiction, Violence and Altericide" *Common Knowledge*. 9.2(2003)241-53
- <sup>17</sup> *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*(eds). James Clifford and George E Marcus. University of California Press,1986(Introduction) Clifford states that ethnographic reports like all acts of representation are finally only "partial truths"; for power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control(p7)



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## WAITING ? POETRY OF KHARMAW

**ABSTRACT.** *This essay, east from contemporary it contends that this happen the Anglo-American war strongly political. This fa politically restless communit the issue of being fair to , the heterogeneity of India*

*Keywords: Political versifiers.*

### Introduction

In 2005 the Boston of Indian English poetry *Change: An Anthology of* and was easily the most appear till then. Two ex *Indian Poets*, published *Contemporary Indian Poets* poets. Unlike previous a *Indian Poets* (1976) and *Modern Indian Poets* (1995) Thayil's efforts have give Indian English poetry with underrated poets.

WAITING TO BE TAKEN ONBOARD: THE  
POETRY OF ROBIN NGANGOM, DESMOND  
KHARMAWPLANG, AND KYNPHAM SING  
NONGKYNRIH

Prasanta Das

**ABSTRACT.** *This essay discusses the exclusion of some well-known poets of the north-east from contemporary anthologies that claim to represent Indian English poetry. It contends that this happens because the work of these poets does not follow the poetics of the Anglo-American world that dominates Indian English poetry and because it is strongly political. This failure mirrors New Delhi's disinclination to listen to the politically restless communities of the north-east. It also has implications that go beyond the issue of being fair to a few individual poets for it hampers our understanding of the heterogeneity of Indian English poetry even as it reveals its limitations.*

**Keywords:** *Political poetry, regional, cosmopolitan, metropolitan, regional versifiers.*

**Introduction**

In 2005 the Boston-based poetry journal *Fulcrum* published an anthology of Indian English poetry edited by Jeet Thayil. *Give the Sea Change and It Shall Change: An Anthology of Indian Poetry in English (1951-2005)* had fifty six poets and was easily the most comprehensive anthology of Indian English poetry to appear till then. Two expanded versions of this anthology are now available: *60 Indian Poets*, published by Penguin India in 2008, and *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, which also came out in 2008, with seventy three poets. Unlike previous anthologies like R Parthasarathy's *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* (1976) and A. K. Mehrotra's *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (1992) which (as their titles indicate) were highly exclusive, Thayil's efforts have given us a fuller sense of the scope and achievement of Indian English poetry while focusing welcome attention on lost, neglected and underrated poets.

In a newspaper interview given after the appearance of the *Fulcrum* issue and before the publication of *60 Indian Poets*, Thayil explained the need for an inclusive anthology of Indian English poetry:

I don't know why Indian poetry has been so clannish, so fragmented... We have seen slivers of Indian poetry, tiny parts of the whole – women poets, the younger poets, post-independence poets, diaspora poets; different "versions" of Indian poetry, it's so fragmented, so clannish, and it's only when you put it all together that you realise Indian poetry is an enormous thing. (Roy 2006)

However, it is significant that Thayil has steadfastly refused to include the work of the Shillong-based poets Robin Ngangom, Desmond Kharmawplang, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in successive versions of his anthology. His failure to make room for the work of these poets has implications that go beyond the issue of being fair to a few individual poets. It arguably hampers our understanding of the heterogeneity of Indian English poetry even as it reveals certain limitations of a body of writing that A. K. Ramanujan (the most self-critical of Indian English poets) once compared to highly evolved but vulnerable deep sea fish: "It [Indian English poetry] often reminds me of certain deep sea fish that can only live in a narrow band adapted to a certain depth, they neither go up nor down – and if by chance they are thrown up to the surface, they burst their bellies – they can't stand the change in pressure" (Kulshrestha 2004: no pagination).

#### Bias against political poetry

Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Kynpham write poetry that is often overtly political. In his introductory essay, "One Language, Separated by the Sea", Thayil says that his aim was to produce an all-inclusive anthology: "Indian poetry, wherever its writers are based, should really be seen as one body of work. Toward that ambition, this anthology includes poets who live in Denmark, France, Canada, Australia, the United States, China, the United Kingdom – and India" (Thayil 2008: xvii). Thayil gives us poets who live and write in New York, New Delhi, London, Itanagar, Bangalore, Berkeley, Goa, Sheffield, Lonavala, Montana, Aarhus, Allahabad, Hong Kong, Montreal, Melbourne, Calcutta, Connecticut, Cuttack and various other places. But despite the novelty of its global ambition, Thayil's anthology is of the familiar and conventional kind: it is clearly bounded by nation ("Indian", no matter how broadly defined) and chronology ("contemporary"). The claims of completeness that Thayil makes seek to validate his anthology as representing the nation in all its complexity (and, by implication, contradictions). But the exclusion of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih means they are given no role in constructing the national imaginary. Thayil's refusal to include the work of these three poets is rather like New Delhi's reluctance to listen to the demands of the politically restless groups and communities of the Northeast. That a prevalent bias against political poetry resulted in the exclusion of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih becomes obvious when we

consider the poems of Northeast Thayil incl Bangalore, she was be there in *Street on the F Head* (2007), her mai sterility of small-town

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#### Poetry with roots

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A few caveats are do not write political po of Ngangom, Kharmav individual differences

consider the poems of Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan, the two poets from the Northeast Thailand includes. Though Hasan (the younger of the two) now lives in Bangalore, she was born and raised in Shillong and writes about growing up there in *Street on the Hill* (2006), her first book of poems, and in *Lunatic in My Head* (2007), her maiden novel. In her poems Hasan tackles such themes as the sterility of small-town existence:

We come in here from the long afternoon  
 Stretched over the town's sloping roofs,  
 Its greasy garages and ice-cream parlours,  
 Its melancholic second-hand bookshops  
 With their many missing pages.  
 Life's not moving. ("To the Chinese Restaurant" 167)

Dai, who lives in Itanagar, writes poetry that has been called "old world" and "neo-romantic in essence". She has a way with words but her tendency to exoticize Arunachal Pradesh makes it seem to exist in a mythic time warp (her fiction gives us a very different picture):

I will remember then the fading voices  
 of deaf women framing the root of light  
 in the first stories to the children of the tribe. ("The Missing Link" 37)

Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan are talented poets but they do not address political issues directly in the way that Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Kynpham do.

#### Poetry with roots

Shillong has a number of poets who write in English: Temsula Ao, Ananya S. Guha, Almond D. Syiem, Indari Syiem Warjri, Esther Syiem, and Donboklang Rynthathiang, to name only a few. However, Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Kynpham are the best known and their political poetry constitutes a distinctive and dominant strand. Ngangom's poems have appeared in many journals, including *Chandrabhaga*, *Indian Literature*, *Kavya Bharati*, *Verse*, and *New Statesman*. He has three books of poems: *Words and Silence* (1988), *Time's Crosswords* (1994), and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). Kharmawplang has two books of poems, *Touchstone* (1988) and *Here*. Nongkynrih has two collections of poems, *Moments* (1992) and *Sieve* (1992). The three are sought-after poets in the region, often invited to give readings, and their poems have been translated into a number of languages, Indian and foreign. In 2008 Nongkynrih was given the first Veer Shankar Shah-Raghunath National Award by the government of Madhya Pradesh for his contribution to tribal art and creative writing.

A few caveats are in order. First, there are a number of Shillong poets who do not write political poetry. Second, it should be stressed that a collective account of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih tends to erase some significant individual differences between the three poets. A third qualification is that

Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih are not single-theme or exclusively political poets; they also write on subjects like love and human relationships. Nongkynrih, for instance, has the cheeky love poem "Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree with Their Sons' Choices of Women": "Leave cherries to winter, mother, / Love to seasoned lovers" (156). And Ngangom has the moving "A Poem for Mother":

Forgive me, for all your dreams  
of peace and rest during your remnant days  
I only turned out to be a small man,  
with small dreams and leading a small life. (25)

However, the three poets feel they have an obligation to write about the crucial contemporary problems of their region. They therefore write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus. This gives their work a distinct identity and a strong sense of being rooted, qualities not often encountered in Indian English poetry. For example, Nissim Ezekiel has been called "a Bombay poet writing in English". But despite Ezekiel's well-known commitment to the city, his is a curiously reference-less Bombay poetry.

#### Witnessing

Ngangom and Nongkynrih have jointly edited a book entitled *Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast* (2003). It provides a representative sampling of the work of the Shillong poets and also of other poets from the region like Yumlam Tana from Arunachal Pradesh and Mona Zote and H. Ramdinhari from Mizoram. (Incidentally, the anthology also has English translations of poems by poets who write in Khasi, Manipuri, Kokborok, Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi.) In their Editors' Note, Ngangom and Nongkynrih have argued that the expressive concerns of the writer from the Northeast cannot be the same as that of a writer from elsewhere in India: "The writer from the Northeast differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living with the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry and woolly aesthetics but perforce master the art of witness" (Nongkynrih and Ngangom 2003: ix-x.). Given this view, it is not surprising that the work of the Shillong poets is often insistently political. Though Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih frequently use the romantic lyric they prefer to ground it in politics.

Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih are dismissive of the work of English and American poets. Though the three are former students of the Department of English, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong and Ngangom and Nongkynrih now teach English literature there (Kharmawplang is with NEHU's Centre for Cultural and Creative Studies), the poets they feel close to are Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milosz, Mahmoud Darwish, and Yehuda Amichai. This list, which has several poets who were displaced, suggests that the poets

Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih are not single-theme or exclusively political poets; they also write on subjects like love and human relationships. Nongkynrih, for instance, has the cheeky love poem "Lines Written to Mothers Who Disagree with Their Sons' Choices of Women": "Leave cherries to winter, mother, / Love to seasoned lovers" (156). And Ngangom has the moving "A Poem for Mother":

#### Poems "riddled with b

The troubled political context and location of the work of the Shillong poets makes it quite different from the work of the other poets. It gives us a sense of the significance of the work of the Shillong poets rather than the "cosmo-

When Prime Minister  
planned a visit  
bamboos sprang  
like a

But when he came  
only the strident  
like warnings  
...

some say he died  
like a falling star  
and was sighted  
disgruntled leaf

...  
they wondered  
what he could  
of the land  
what of the poet

...  
only the bamboo  
too used to the  
Ngangom's poems  
In "The Strange Affair

Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih like are those who write poetry of the public and political kind. Their own poems communicate a sense of being written on behalf of a community (even when they are sometimes bitterly critical of their people). That the work of the three Shillong poets belongs to a specific context and location probably needs no demonstration. However, this aspect makes it quite different from metropolitan Indian English poetry which often gives us a sense of the individual (solitary) poet addressing the single reader. It is significant that it was the "regional" Jayanta Mahapatra who was an early champion of the work of the three Shillong poets, particularly the poetry of Ngangom, rather than the "cosmopolitan" Ezekiel.

#### Poems "riddled with bullets"

The troubled political situation in the northeastern states is reflected in the poetry of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih. Their poetry speaks of the problems of insurgency, conflict and oppression. The poets are often angry and satire is a weapon they frequently use. Nongkynrih's "When the Prime Minister Visits Shillong the Bamboos Watch in Silence" has been described by Arundhati Subramanian as "a masterpiece of acerbic understatement":

When Prime Minister Gujral  
planned a visit to the city  
bamboos sprang up from the pavements  
like a welcoming committee.

But when he came, he was  
only the strident sounds  
like warnings in war-time bombings.

...  
some say he dropped  
like a falling star  
and was sighted by a few  
disgruntled leaders.

...  
they wondered  
what he could have seen  
of the land  
what of the people

...  
only the bamboos watched in silence  
too used to the antics of men. (159)

Ngangom's poems are – as he says in "Last Word" – "riddled with bullets" (9). In "The Strange Affair of Robin S Ngangom", he describes a visit to his native

Manipur, ravaged by the conflict between the Indian armed forces and insurgents:

When I turn with a heavy heart  
towards my burning land,  
the hills, woman, scream your name.

...  
instead of your musk  
I inhale the acrid smoke  
of gelignite and pyres. (67)

In Manipur much human suffering and loss of life can be attributed to the extraordinary Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which empowers the armed forces to shoot to kill on the basis of mere suspicion. However, there is also the competing, militant nationalism of the anti-Indian "revolutionary" outfits. Patriotism "is admiring / the youth who fondles grenades" ("Strange Affair" 69). In "Native Land" Ngangom relates his numbed reaction to an act of terrorist violence:

First came the scream of the dying  
in a bad dream, then the radio report,  
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five  
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied  
behind their backs inside a church...

I ceased thinking  
of abandoned children inside blazing huts  
still waiting for their parents.

...  
I burnt my truth with them,  
and buried uneasy manhood with them.  
I did mutter, on some far-off day:  
"There are limits", but when the days  
absolved the butchers, I continue to live  
as if nothing happened. (154-55)

"Native Land" shows us how facile the distinction between political and personal poetry can be: the poet-speaker is led to introspect on his humanity by an event that has occurred in the political arena. The poem, an act of imaginative rather than actual witnessing, involves the reader in a similar process act of witnessing and introspection.

#### "Recorder of bitter things"

A desire to communicate directly is evident in Desmond Kharmawplang's use of the private yet public mode of epistolary address. In "Letter to a Dear Friend", he describes himself as a "recorder of bitter things" and speaks of the

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corruption of politicians and the impact of development on the environment:

They are a peculiar breed, the leaders –  
they have an eel for a tongue,  
a mint for a brain.

...

When you write next,  
I may have some interesting things to  
report – may be about the advent  
of acid rain or even the disappearance of  
some villages for the mining of  
a rare mineral. (31)

Though "Letter to a Dear Friend" was written almost two decades ago, it has become all the more relevant in the context of the current agitation against uranium mining in Meghalaya.

In "The Conquest", Kharmawplang voices the anger felt by the Khasis at the impact of colonialism on their life and land. The state of Meghalaya was created in 1972 to empower the tribal people and give them some control over their destiny but Kharmawplang's poem expresses resentment and frustration at another kind of "conquest":

Quite suddenly, the British left.  
There was peace, the sweet  
smell of wet leaves again.

But in the wavering walk of time  
there came those from the sweltering plains,  
from everywhere.

You stricken Land, how they love  
your teeming soil, your bruised children.  
One of them told me, "You know,  
yours is a truly metropolitan city". (135)

This poem is intended as a wake up call for the indigenous population. (It is of course disturbing to the "outsiders" who consider Shillong home. Siddhartha Deb's fine novel *The Point of Return* gives us the other side of the story: the version of the interlopers in Kharmawplang's poem.)

"I have known you a long time, my brother"

It is conventional to think of Indian English poetry as a largely personal poetry. In fact, this is believed to be its strength. As Bruce King's very influential account has it, while the earlier poets had made a false start by consciously



attempting to be Indian and nationalist, Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, and Dom Moraes created an authentic body of work by turning away from political and public themes and writing instead about their personal lives and selves. A perusal of *60 Indian Poets* (or the *Bloodaxe* book) will confirm that this tradition continues in the new generation of poets. But this means that Indian English poetry has consciously turned its back on a role that poetry has often fulfilled in non-Anglo Saxon countries. Its emphasis on the personal, and the consequent valorization of values like understatement and irony, derives mostly from British and American models of poetry which have dominated Indian English poetry. But merely to mention the names of Derek Walcott, Pablo Neruda, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Yehuda Amichai, and Mahmoud Darwish is to be reminded of poetry's potential and its public role. Incidentally, the refusal to be political is of course itself a political position; the apolitical Indian English poet is in fact a covertly political writer. Ezekiel's poetic vision, for example, is entrenched in the politics of survival and neatly fits in with the Nehruvian paradigm of a secular society, mixed economy, and non-alignment in international politics.

In his *Memoirs*, Neruda writes:

When I wrote my first lonely books, it never entered my mind that, with passing years, I would find myself in squares, streets, factories, lecture halls, theaters, and gardens, reading my poems. I have gone into practically every corner of Chile, scattering my poetry like seed among the people of my country. (253)

Neruda also mentions how a coal miner in a remote part of Chile, emerging from underground, greeted him with the words: "I have known you a long time, my brother" (171). That poetry has had, and continues to have, a similar position in our culture and politics is clear when we think of certain Indian poetic traditions and contexts. For instance, the high proportion of poetry in lists of publications banned by the government after 1857 indicates how it had become a natural vehicle for the expression of nationalist sentiment in colonial India. It was a shared language that made it possible for Neruda to compare his poems with seeds. As we noted earlier, the work of the Shillong poets is written on behalf of, and is addressed to, their communities. Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih can presume to do this because the same social and cultural factors that have made Shillong the "rock capital of India" also ensure a climate in which English language poetry can be written with the expectation of greater receptivity than in most parts of the country.

Ramanujan's likening of Indian English poetry to deep sea fish suggests its (deliberately) circumscribed social and aesthetic bounds. Contrasting the work of Indian English poets with that of their counterparts in fiction, Ramanujan remarked that there was nothing "like the efforts of Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* to write a Kannada English, or Desani to write a full-blooded comic Indian English" (Kulshrestha 2004: no pagination). (*Midnight's Children* was still in the future

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### The three Shillong j

The poetics of Nongkynrih differs : dominated Indian Er excludes Ngangom, F Ranjit Hoskote, di contemporary poets, for "craft" (Thayil 2 write poetry that is i poems. This kind of generally prefer intel of the inverted com metropolis formerly kind just described.) Nongkynrih may ap arguably more "glot sources that Indian E commissioned Thay forum for contempot poets first from the / ones highlights the "globalization" to de NGO system with its of deradicalizing loc

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when he made these comments.) It is difficult to agree entirely with Ramanujan; certainly his apparent prescription to write "comic Indian English" can be objected to. (Ezekiel's efforts in that direction were not too happy.) But Ramanujan's point about the Indian English poet's isolation is surely valid: "Most of us who write for some reason or other in English have probably written ourselves into the margin...we also get separated from the great community of people in India" (Kulshrestha 2004: no pagination). It is striking that despite sharing a common linguistic situation the Indian English novel, in contrast to poetry, has shown ambition. There is no equivalent in Indian English poetry to the kind of interrogation of nation and history which we find in the Indian English novels of the 1980s and 1990s. On the odd occasion that the Indian English poet has sought to engage with larger issues, it has been very modestly done. In fact, the very limited ambitions of the poets is often reflected in the very titles of the few poems which comment on public issues, as for example Ramanujan's, "Small Scale Reflections on a Great House" (which is often read as a "national allegory") and Ezekiel's "Background, *Casually*" (in which he makes his famous commitment to stay on in Bombay and India). Little wonder Indian English poetry lacks an *Omeros*.

#### The three Shillong poets vs. "the Bombay poets"

The poetics at work in the poetry of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih differs from that of the Anglo-American world which has so long dominated Indian English poetry. So perhaps it should not surprise us that Thayil excludes Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih or that an earlier anthologist, Ranjit Hoskote, did not include the three in his anthology of fourteen contemporary poets, *Reasons for Belonging* (2002). Thayil admits to a preference for "craft" (Thayil 2008: xviii.). Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih write poetry that is narrative and emotional; they also make statements in their poems. This kind of poetry runs counter to the taste of "the Bombay poets", who generally prefer intellectual poetry and a playful use of language. (The function of the inverted commas is to acknowledge that you can live and write in the metropolis formerly known as Bombay without being a "Bombay" poet of the kind just described.) From a metropolitan angle, Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih may appear to be mere "regional versifiers", even though they are arguably more "global" since they show the influence of poets, traditions and sources that Indian English poets have generally avoided. *Fulcrum*, which originally commissioned Thayil to do put together his anthology, sees itself as a global forum for contemporary English-language poetry. But the exclusion of the Shillong poets first from the *Fulcrum* anthology and then from the Penguin and Bloodaxe ones highlights the power and license given to intermediaries in an age of "globalization" to define and filter the local. One notes a parallel here with the NGO system with its similar dependence on mediators who are sometimes accused of deradicalizing local movements.

It was perhaps an early realization of the need to create a conducive climate for the writing and reception of poetry of their kind of poetry that led Ngangom,

Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih (especially in the first part of their careers) to found the Shillong Poetry Circle, organize poetry readings, bring out poetry magazines and anthologies, and interact with other poets whenever it was possible. For instance, in 1992 Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih facilitated the Welsh poet Nigel Jenkins's visit to Meghalaya to research a book on the life of Thomas Jones, the first missionary to work among the Khasis. (Incidentally, Jenkins's book, *Through the Green Door*, has interesting portraits of the poets). The results were mutually beneficially. Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih published the work of five important Welsh poets in *Lyric*, the journal of the Shillong Poetry Society, and Jenkins was able to arrange a grant that made it possible for the three poets to visit Wales and present their poetry to a new audience.

### Conclusion

Introducing a recent edition of Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*, Amit Chaudhuri has argued that since *Midnight's Children* critics of Indian English writing have stressed works of the "monumental" kind at the expense of other kinds of writing. He suggests that Kolatkar's poem, which describes the poet's journey to a small town near Pune famous for its temple of a locally worshipped god, can serve as a representative text for writing of a different kind. Chaudhuri is not concerned with political writing but he makes a valid point when he says that had other kinds of writing received due attention "our view of Indian writing in English would be a different, a more heterogeneous and unexpected one than it has been in the last twenty-five years" (Chaudhuri 2005: xxvi). This accusation can of course be applied to Thayil and other anthologists whose priorities and perspectives, as we have argued, affect our perceptions of Indian English poetry. That Indian English poetry is heterogeneous receives occasional recognition in the pages of small magazines and in papers and discussions at poetry seminars and conferences. Anthology-making however is important since it is the first step in canon-formation. It is difficult to match the resources of a multinational publishing house; Ngangom and Nongkynrih's anthology cannot really counter Thayil's. Therefore one can only hope that future anthologists of Indian English poetry, especially those who aim to be comprehensive, will take on board the poems of Ngangom, Kharmawplang, and Nongkynrih as well as those of others like, for instance, Meena Kandaswamy, the Dalit poet and activist.

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## HISTORICAL FICTION FROM THE NORTHEAST: METHODS, PRACTICES, ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS

*Siddhartha Sarma*

**ABSTRACT.** *This article attempts to examine the necessity for more works of historical fiction from the Northeast, as well as systems using which a writer can create such a work. It looks at methodologies and treatments already utilised by other authors for subjects in different parts of the world, and whether these methodologies are also suited to the region.*

*It will also look at unique tools and traditions of the Northeast which might either aid the writer in forging her narrative or act as legacies which stands to be inherited in terms of interpretation of history. It will also examine shortcomings that certain systems and pre-conceptions might offer as hurdles to creating a reasonably competent work, citing examples of other narratives from elsewhere.*

**Keywords:** *Historical fiction, history, revisionism, research, buranji, itihasa, Ahom Kingdom, oral tradition, journalists, historians, Second World War, Myanmar/Burma, Naga Hills.*

### Body

It has long been an established fact, or trope rather — and dearly held by peers and publishers from what, for lack of a more suitable word, can be termed the mainstream—that fiction from the Northeast, particularly in English, is the fastest growing uncharted territory in Indian publishing as matters stand today. While the fertility of the well-springs, as well as the quality, of language fiction from the several languages of this region has been undisputed, it is the emerging voice of English fiction writers, their themes and treatment which is turning into the last great frontier for rich pickings in Indian English literature. As I write this I have just congratulated Jahnvi Barua for her latest novel, *Rebirth*, being selected in the shortlist for the 2012 Commonwealth Book Prize, the second time this book has featured in a prestigious award list after the Man Asian Prize last year. It is a fair indicator of the shape of things to come.

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There are several genres being explored by this crop of our regional writers, but the one I shall discuss is historical fiction. For obvious and regrettable reasons, publishers tend to be more receptive to works by new authors dealing with either insurgency (another trope about the region beaten to death in the media and publishing, revived and now being in the process of, shall we say, re-beaten) or displacement, mirroring the standard expatriate Indian experience in English fiction, in which a possibly idyllic life in a hill town is contrasted with the Northeastern expatriate's life in some interchangeable mainstream city, where "variably fashionable marionettes jiggle and sing"<sup>1</sup> or "stereotyped images of 'chinks' on bikes in search of beer and beef"<sup>2</sup> abound.

In such a state of affairs, one must examine the very nature of the different societies that exist in this most remarkable region. With ethnic discord and crises of self-identity and image as pronounced as ever, a society, as evidenced in other times, other places, tends to look towards its history and that of its neighbours. In the case of the Northeast, this evaluation acquires political overtones as witnessed in the use of events of the past by different groups as justification of their current agendas. Such political overtones frequently run the risk of leading to historical revisionism, a subject we shall deal with subsequently. Therefore, a properly researched and crafted work of historical fiction would be immensely helpful in leading to a society's understanding of itself and, if done with tact, sagacity and even-handedness, possibly rapprochement. In the context of the Northeast, therefore, the necessity for more works of historical fiction acquires a great measure of urgency.

The genre itself has no concrete or dogmatic parameters, if one were to examine some of the best examples of it from other cultures or even languages of the world. Broadly speaking, historical fiction involves the use of historical events or people, with different measures of accuracy, in a fictionalised framework. The only variation, going by this definition, is thus in the degree of historical authenticity of the narrative. It depends on the writer herself to decide where known and verifiable facts stop and her own creation begins. Some choose to paint in a mild authentic backdrop, while others go the opposite extent and ask themselves: just how much of true, verifiable and recorded history can I insert into my tale and then weave my fictional characters and events seamlessly into it? I can state here that I belong to the latter category, and an exploration of how much of the envelope history can let me fill is, I have discovered, a most rewarding experience. Frederick Forsyth, former war journalist and one of the best-known research-based thriller fiction writers once remarked at a speech for literature students that a very interesting exercise goes thus: if there are a hundred parts to your narrative, and ninety-nine of them are true, well-known and utterly verifiable by your reader, when you insert the last part, which is completely fictional but is also completely unverifiable either way, the fictional element becomes an organic part of the whole and therefore acquires the aura of legitimate history. This is a very challenging but enjoyable little literary sleight-of-hand.

Research, thus, plays a key role in determining the eventual quality of the story, assuming other factors, such as the quality of writing of the author, are at an acceptably high standard. Most dedicated readers of historical fiction are by

inference and in practice also professional historians or amateur readers of historical non-fiction, and therefore examine such fiction with a sharply critical, if not always objective, eye. Authenticity, the consultation of reliable source material and documents and the ability to sift through large masses of distracting incidental data are key assets during this stage of the work. Once again, writers can be categorised by the degree of rigour of their research and their willingness to be authentic. Some are content with securing the broader brushstrokes of events, corresponding with those writers mentioned above in whose works authentic history is at best incidental. Progressing through the different shades of increasing rigour, we finally approach what I call the "no-limits" club: writers who attempt to, or will, get every aspect and detail correct and verifiable. I try to follow this method not just because I believe it is fair on the reader, but also because it is an interesting exercise in data gathering, interpretation and analysis.

Apart from the necessity of going through as much available source material as possible and required, this group also believes in exploring the subject in the field, a practice which can perhaps be termed method writing. In the course of research for my debut novel, which is based in Upper Assam and the Naga Hills during the Second World War, I went through existing archival information and works of ethnographic and anthropological scholarship and then travelled over the region in question to get accurate ideas about terrain, geography, vegetation and weather (for which I had to time my travels with the season during which the events in the novel had to take place). In order to enter the constitutions of the characters I intended to create, I lived on the food and wore the clothes they were eventually described as having in the novel (and which travellers of the early 1940s in the Naga Hills are recorded to have used), in the course of which I hiked the hills and camped in the open for a few days on a diet consisting entirely of dried pork strips and unfiltered spring water from a rather decrepit goatskin bag, a method I would not recommend to anyone not having an indifferent and long-suffering stomach. In order to correctly describe the workings of a certain mark of an iconic rifle which plays a key role in the story, I bribed my way into Myanmar and obtained that rifle and corresponding authentic bullets which I then test-fired. Combining the archival material with these experiences, the result was I had a most gratifying time writing the novel later.

Certainly this last method comes with difficulties, the most significant being whether the researcher will choose, if required, to commit a serious breach of law ('serious' being the key word here) or indeed any breach, or travel in areas with law-and-order problems (I was assaulted by militants in Manipur). If not, a modicum of academic rigour in archival and scholarly research also leads to amassing of substantial data, although the finer details and texture might not emerge as readily as while living in the field.

Researching in the Northeast for different periods of its history comes with certain advantages and legacies which need to be appreciated. In the history of Assam itself exist the *buranjis*, unarguably the most detailed and consistent works of state record of any culture in South Asia, counting similar traditions in the kingdoms of Burma and those of the Khmer, for none of the latter saw the kind

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of long-term political stability that characterised the Ahom Kingdom. If it hadn't been for the unfortunate depredations of the minister Kirti Chandra Borborua in the 1760s during the reign of Rajeswar Singha, these records would have possibly survived intact and would have given us a fantastic and complete portrayal of Assam's history since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. As things are, even the few that survive today are marvellous legacies and primers for us to inherit and to treat history as a very serious and painstaking exercise, a sharp contrast to Hindu traditions where mythological works are cavalierly clubbed as *itihasa*. Among the key features of note about the *buranjis*, which are of particular relevance to any historical fiction writer from the region, is their extensive depth. Also, while the *likhakar barua*, the person responsible for compiling, storing and maintaining them, was a well-known hierarch with a very significant post in the court, the actual analysts, contributors and editors mostly chose to remain unknown. This practice was less from fear of pressure or reprisal and more out of respect for the avowed objectivity of these records, a goal which was scrupulously adhered to as the centuries rolled past. Such an attitude, the treating of historical record as a sacred and supremely self-effacing enterprise is an ideal which needs to be followed if their mantle is to sit well on our shoulders.

Other societies have the unique advantages inherent in oral traditions, namely their beliefs, practices and histories (although the latter would inevitably acquire, over generations, the patina of myth and legend) were immediate and raw because they never encountered the possibility of being fossilised through codification. History as a living entity has its own charms.

When it comes to accessing records and documents of the colonial era, however, one must beware of the dangers of revisionism. It has been seen lately that the records and accounts of colonial scholars on the Northeast are being summarily dismissed as unfair at best and outright fabrication at worst, keeping in line, perhaps, with the general Indian post-colonial tendency of negating, if one may call it that, the works of the British. This is somewhat unfair. While accessing these works one must keep in mind that any colonial or proselytising agenda of the Raj's scholars was merely a reflection of their times and not an act of academic villainy. One is free to choose the portions relevant and helpful to one's project from such source material, while being conscious of the more obvious instances of propaganda. While reading J P Mills' *The Ao Nagas*, part of his multi-volume study into the major Naga tribes, I was struck by the magnitude of the man's enterprise. He had travelled over the areas of influence of the Aos, recorded their beliefs, myths and culture and drawn clear demarcations of their different ranges or provinces, called *kong*. A researcher can easily refer to these and compare with Ao demographics today to understand changes in their society since the 1920s. Mills simply left no ambiguity in the scope of his work. While deciding on one of the two maps I eventually included in the novel, I picked a certain portion of the Naga Hills which was clearly drawn by hand by Mills himself based on his own surveys of the terrain. I then took a high-resolution satellite terrain map of the same area and placing one over the other discovered that Mills had gotten every single landform correct in size, gradient and altitude. Mills'



map, which I wanted to re-draw by hand for my manuscript, was so complex I went with the easier option, which is why the reader will find the satellite map in the novel instead. I had been bested by a long-dead British surveyor.

But when it comes to sections such as where he notes with relief that the thick jungles of the Ao foothills prevent "devious Assamese plainsmen"<sup>2</sup> from journeying into the more innocent uplands, the researcher will certainly use his discretion and skip the passage without tarnishing Mills' entire canvas and thus missing his actual achievement as a chronicler. This line applies equally to other colonial era scholars.

Following research, the principal problem is usually ironic: too much data. To work around this, the writer needs to be able to think on her feet about the exact parameters of her project so that the merely incidental or burdensome can be culled out immediately. Photographs are one such area where only a small percentage of the total crop will be effectively utilised (since we live in an age when digital photography permits us to take unlimited pictures for later editing). The sooner such culling is done, the faster one can proceed with analysis and framing.

Having looked at ways and means, it is fitting to examine some works which are actual historical fiction and some which, strictly speaking, are not. For a novel might be based in an earlier period but might not satisfy any of the criteria we have examined. Biren Bhattacharyya's *Yaruingam* is a classic example in this context. As a work of Assamese literature, it has certainly earned its position as a milestone and justifiably has a cult status. Bhattacharyya's skills as a writer are unquestionable and neither, perhaps, is his understanding of the human mind and relationships. However, it is not a work of historical fiction. The actual history of the period in which his novel is based, the Second World War and the coming of the Japanese, is not explored as much as the relationship between the Tangkhul Naga girl Sarenka and the boy Rishang. It can be argued that the theme of intense love, violation of the female protagonist by powerful forces that invade a happy existence (in this case a Japanese soldier), rejection by the aggrieved male protagonist and the element of loss could have just as easily been set in another time, another people. While such universality and interchangeability might be seen as a reason for a novel's universal appeal as a work of pure literature, it must justify its 'historical' tag as well. And what an opportunity Bhattacharyya had. He was in the Naga Hills by 1950, when the scars of the war had hardly begun to heal and Naga society was undergoing such change. He could just as easily have brought out the position of that small patch of the planet in the global scheme of things, of how world history shaped and moulded an emerging Naga consciousness (although its beginnings went back even further, to a previous global war). Instead, what we get is a love story, beautifully told no doubt, but without the added attractions that historical fiction pre-supposes.

And there is the question of his prejudices too, which need not be seen through the prism of revisionism at all. "In his preface to the original Assamese version of *Yaruingam*, Birendrakumar Bhattacharya (sic) declares that his stay with the Tangkhul Nagas was an attempt to understand their way of life. But he found it as *difficult as dealing with a stone that can't be lifted*. Disclaiming that his love for their

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way of live (sic) was a love for *primitiveness*, he yet goes on to say that in their *primitiveness* he glimpses constituents of the quest for a new life. He says that the Nagas too are a people, but a different kind of people, beneath the façade of uncompromising iron will lie the beauty of a timeless humanness. These apparent contradictions in his preface clearly points (sic) out that the author was on uneven ground, a territory that he was not familiar with." (*Italics as in original source*)<sup>4</sup>

Bhattacharyya, going by this scholar, has apparently failed in a proper anthropologic and ethnographic understanding of his very subjects, by his reference to their "primitiveness" and therefore playing up that haggard old trope of the noble savage, seeking in them the "humanness" beneath the "uncompromising iron" which he believes to be the key definer of a "people", not appreciating the fact that, in certain societies and certain breeds of men, iron *is* a part of their human condition. Acting with the poet's blithe disregard for the cold and hard facts of genuine history, Bhattacharyya compromises the historicity and ethnic genuineness of his tale by fusing it with his preconceptions as coloured by, firstly, his own background as a plainsman from a different culture, and secondly by a version of what civilisation and primitiveness are. This, too, is a kind of revisionism, although ironically it took place just after the actual history had played out in that region. It is bewildering, really, for he was a witness to that era and that generation, he did not have to undergo the brutal exercise of recreating it in his initial homework, and his understanding was apparently not tempered at all by his profession as a teacher among the Nagas.

One may contrast this with a comparatively lesser-known and almost as well-written novel of the same period, geographically a little more to the east: *Jangam*, by Debendranath Acharya. Coming three decades later, Acharya narrates a journey by displaced farmers from then Burma into India in advance of the Japanese Army. It is, more than a tale of placement, one of disequilibrium, striving and search, perfect themes to be explored in such times. The addition of British characters brings in more nuances to the narrative and an indication of a wider worldview. While his research was not entirely up to scratch (terrain is wrong in many places and so is flora) his intentions are clear. It is a story that just could not have been set anywhere else in any other time. That is the hallmark of true historical fiction. His effort shows in his descriptions and dialogues. Interestingly, like *Yaruingam*, this novel too went on to win the Sahitya Akademi Award, although awards are hardly yardsticks for determining literary merit. And yet *Jangam* hardly finds mention when it comes to instant recall of historical fiction from this region, possibly because, fed as we have been on the Indian film industry's unbearably soppy and insipid romances, it is to such relationships that a fiction reader cleaves, and not to others, or other experiences not mirrored in our more prosaic existence.

Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Boy Who Became King*, written in English, is another good example of effortless fusion of known and verifiable history into a fictionalised work, for the protagonist, the Bamuni Konwar of the Ahom Kingdom, is a familiar figure. Dutta's treatment is masterly, and his tale comes alive in a manner that makes one admire the way he has used history in just the right measure.

From this comparison we can rather seamlessly move into what kinds of treatment of this genre exist in the wider world which can be effectively employed in our region today. About matters where enough technical knowledge is needed but which should be narrated in a manner unobtrusive to the overall exploration of the human condition, a fitting example is Len Deighton's *Goodbye Mickey Mouse*, unarguably one of the finest works of historical fiction in English of all time. Set in England during 1944, it explores the lives of American aviators who had descended to contribute their efforts to the defense of their ally. The iconic P-51 Mustang aircraft is practically a character here, and testament to Deighton's dedication are the six years he spent researching how to fly it, from instrumentation to ordnance to the individual lives of its aviators and the culture of its airbases. As a *Washington Post* reviewer remarked: "The only way you could know more about flying a P-51 Mustang, after reading this book, is to have flown one."

And yet Deighton does not permit the wealth of data he gathers to subsume the narrative, for it is ultimately a story of men and women and not just machines. It is also about love, but the peculiar setting, personalities and indeed the very nature of their relationships could not have been duplicated in any other era, thus justifying its 'historical' tag.

At times, revisionism itself can be turned around on its head and be used as a supremely effective tool. Mary Lee Settle, in *Spanish Recognitions*, charts an interesting parallel, through use of the creative non-fiction and travelogue genres, between contemporary Spanish society, its failings, fissures and strengths and those of the Reconquista era, drawing on common geography as a very clever device. Thus even her maps tell their stories through the Klein's bottle that has been Spanish history from the disaster of 711 AD to the uncertainties of the present. Such a tool can be very valuable in a region such as ours where ethnic identities co-exist uneasily within a shared geography.

Another classic example of a wholly different approach to historical fiction is Walter A McDougall's magnum opus *Let the Sea Make a Noise*. Its subject is, in one word, vast, for it covers four centuries of different civilisations' march to the northern Pacific, a period which saw contention, alliances and intrigue among such powers as China, the US, Russia and Japan, with smaller nations like Hawaii caught in the middle. How, then, does he present it? He alternates between straight tellings of historical events and wholly fictionalised conversations among the men of power, the policymakers, of these civilisations large and small over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> Thus we have 18<sup>th</sup> century Hawaiian royals in conversation with 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian counts and 20<sup>th</sup> century American diplomats, making for radically different and quite consuming narratives, a method which might be employed to bridge time and ethnic differences among our own people, provided the history bit is detailed and the fiction bit written well.

A large part of the nature of treatment of this genre undeniably rests on the specific background of the writer. The methods I employ are determined or, rather, limited by the fact that I am neither a trained historian nor an archaeologist (assuming my subject goes far enough back in time). The only skillset I can effectively bring into play is my background as an investigative

journalist. I therefore with intensive research and real field experience

This kind of creative non-fiction. Michael comes with his unique perspective towards hard military history, is evidenced in *Ghosting*. His ginger approach to events is on a careening ride that is even more monumental than a substantial chunk of *Age of Ages*, with swift but not a frame or by the un-

Finally, an anecdote about two men, equally renowned as a journalist, and how they approached the first was Stephen American historian

Ryan had an interest in Berlin shortly after its fall (*The Longest Day*), and the Garden (*A Bridge To*) simplifications and

Ryan was a journalist who he did not have to deal with the repercussions. When the Landings (*D-Day*), a peacetime (*Band of*) the historian observed failings, including that of Dwight Eisenhower to reach the city first

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All said and done, attention to detail as to historical fiction, and, someday, arrive

journalist. I therefore have to counter-balance my shortcomings as a scholar with intensive research and analysis drawing on the experts themselves and by real field experience.

This kind of counter-balance can be seen in history works both fiction and non-fiction. Michael Golay's *The Tide of Empire: America's March to the Pacific* comes with his unique tag and background. Hampton Sides' particular leanings towards hard military history, with the first word more emphasised than the second, is evidenced in *Ghost Soldiers*. Ronald Hurst's *Golden Rock* comes laced with his ginger approach to established fact and, while still holding facts as sacred, proceeds on a careening ride of a narrative. Peter Heather's *Empires and Barbarians*, which is even more monumental, if that were possible, than McDougall, goes through a substantial chunk of middle European history, that period referred to as the Dark Ages, with swift brushstrokes, never weighed down by the burden of its time-frame or by the unwieldy nature of some of its historical subjects.

Finally, an analysis would be incomplete without comparing the fates of two men, equally renowned, from two diverse fields: one a historian and one a journalist, and how they tackled historical fiction and non-fiction for lay readers. The first was Stephen E Ambrose, possibly the finest, and also controversial, American historian in recent times, while the journalist was Cornelius Ryan.

Ryan had an abiding interest in the Second World War, being posted in Berlin shortly after it ended, and wrote several works on the Normandy Landings (*The Longest Day*), the Battle for Berlin (*The Last Battle*) and Operation Market-Garden (*A Bridge Too Far*), two of which were made, with appropriate Hollywood simplifications and drama, into cult classics.

Ryan was a journalist and his works coloured by his profession. Most notably, he did not have the historian's firmer grasp of macro political events and repercussions. When Ambrose came along later, also writing on the Normandy Landings (*D-Day*, a work just as extensive as Ryan's), and other novels of war and peacetime (*Band of Brothers*, *Citizen Soldiers*, *Undaunted Courage*, *This Vast Land*) the historian observed with a great amount of certitude that Ryan had many failings, including the fact that he never understood how politically naïve General Dwight Eisenhower was for not marching into Berlin and permitting the Soviets to reach the city first, thus starting, unwittingly, the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, Ambrose was not a journalist and therefore did not have the paranoia for an "errorless copy" that the newsroom generates, thus making some ludicrous blunders, such as claiming America's military death toll in the war was "negligible"<sup>7</sup> (it was actually the second-highest after the USSR), getting that number wrong by tens of thousands, getting the measurements of weapons wrong, including that of the famous German Panzer, misquoting witnesses and so on. Elementary mistakes which a seasoned investigative reporter like Ryan never did. And thus both professions, with their faults and foibles, played out their roles in the genre.

All said and done, a combination of academic rigour with the journalist's attention to detail and the sometimes-held ideal of objectivity is the best approach to historical fiction, particularly if we are to use it as a tool to understand, empathise and, someday, arrive at a rapprochement among the identities of our land. It is

out of unfailing objectivity and loyalty to facts, and the willingness to do whatever needs to be done to gather them, that justice comes in all its manifestations, and if this were brought about through as entertaining a medium as fiction, it would be for the best.

As far as political leadership goes, how should treatments of history be taken by the leaders, such as we have, of today? We can go back to Ambrose, who, remember, squarely blamed Eisenhower's failings and naïveté for the Cold War. How did Eisenhower, general, liberator of Western Europe and 20<sup>th</sup> century America's second-greatest president respond to this criticism?

He agreed to let Ambrose write his biography.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup>*Tolkien's Magic Ring* (1966) by Peter S Beagle, in reference to modern works of more realistic contemporary fiction.
- <sup>2</sup>*Scale News*, a review of Ankush Saikia's *Jet City Woman* by Sonya Dutta Choudhury, *India Today*, January 17, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup>*The Ao Nagas* (1926) by J P Mills.
- <sup>4</sup>*An ethnocritical approach to Birendrakumar Bhattacharya's Love in the Time of Insurgency* by Dr Parag M Sharma.
- <sup>5</sup> Profile on the writer, Ashland University.
- <sup>6</sup>*Refighting the Last Battle: The Pitfalls of Popular History* by Stephen E Ambrose, *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer 1966.
- <sup>7</sup>*The World at War*, Episode 35, transcript written by Ambrose.

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## PERFORMING POWER IN A

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PERFORMING THE SELF: THE POLITICS OF  
POWER IN THE ASSAMESE PLAYWRIGHT  
ARUN SHARMA'S PLAYS

*Namrata Pathak*

**ABSTRACT.** *In the realm of drama/theatre, even though a body is material and given, its meanings keep on changing because these meanings are discursively and performatively constructed and understood. Arun Sharma uses the ideas of "performativity" and "performative" to help articulate the understanding of the subject's political and social agency. These acts are not singular events, but ritualized production. Here, agency itself arises not from a subject existing before the performance of identity; but rather from the "self" constituted by performance. There is a possibility of alteration and modification in the process of repeating the performance. Sharma's plays, likewise, serves as an important site of cultural enquiry. They serve as sites in which concealed or dissimulated conventions are investigated. Moreover, this site of performance evokes questions of embodiment; of social relations; of ideological interpellations, and of emotional and political effects. Moreover, the concepts like self and subjectivity cannot be studied and investigated without alluding to different levels of power play in the text. In Sharma's plays, issues like self, identity and subjectivity are political, critical, and marked by differences. Similarly important for him is the performance of historically marginalized identities; people who are hitherto unrepresented in the still dominant humanist discourses about subjectivity. According to him, what is paradoxical about the historically marginalized groups is their political need and a claim to a fixed identity in the realm of political struggles. Thus, we can say that the idea of the self as a performative entity provides a critique of the enlightenment cogito. The concept of the self, as envisaged in Sharma's plays, is designated as a continuous process which is perpetually creating and recreating itself. Hence, the performance of the self is all about cuts, deferrals and mobility of frames.*

*The Assamese playwright Arun Sharma is particularly sensitive to the various complexities that attend to the issue of the self. According to Sharma, in our rapidly changing society, subjects that were once considered "taboo" and swept under the carpet of silence are now tumbling out of closets. The un-fixing of culture and the debordering*

of nations have opened the way for new formulations of "self" and "identity". Sharma shows how the self in contemporary cultural discourse is not a single thing at all, but is an "open" category subject to change, choice, personal motivation, desires, freedom and an infinite raft of interactions and redirections. In plays like *Sri Nibarān Bhattacharya* (1961), *Agnigarh* (1996) and *Aditir Atmakatha* (2000) (a trilogy), *Kukurnesiya Manuh* (1965), *Aahar* (1964) and *Purush* (1964) Sharma is keen to portray those individuals in a socio-cultural condition who attempt to seek the disorderly and the new; and refuse to surrender to the norms of tradition. For, to "become" an individual is to abandon self realization through the fulfillment of normative social relations and to constantly move in a dialectical relationship of what is and what might be. Sharma regards the concept of the self as a process in which myriad power play, antagonistic principles interact and alternate in different fashions and proportions and in different places and times.

**Keywords:** performance, subjectivity, power, resistance, transgression, identity politics.

The concept of the self that we have traced in the Assamese playwright Arun Sharma's plays is essentially unstable in nature, as it is changeable and transitive, on one hand, and plural and fragmented, on the other. Just as the empowered reader produces the meanings of the author's text, the audience of these plays constructs the relationships and associations of the self in terms of the "other." The self works in alignment with the "other" in its specific, local, and institutional struggles. The altered and diversified role ascribed to the subject can be termed as that of an interpreter who takes part in a conversation across discourses; rather than a "legislator" who arbitrates on respective values.

Primarily, there are two processes that go hand in hand in the workings of the self. On the one hand, the subject is said to occupy multiple positions and sites as it is a combination of class, racial, ethnic, regional, generational, sexual, and gender positions. The concept of the self disposes off precisely the Kantian unity of the person which makes for social order and moral orthodoxy. From a postmodern point of view, there is a move to deconstruct the moral unity of the subject and a classically liberal desire to evade the repressive ideological boundaries that the self encounters. This is indeed the first process of liberating and expressing the self. The second process assumes an interrogative stance which underlines that the justification of evading or redrawing boundaries is itself an ideological position. How can we deny the fact that the subject occupies a central position in the struggle to bring about a social and political change? Although the self occupies an "analytical position" it also affirms and works through differences; it is nevertheless related to the strengthening of our collective capacities to engage in meaningful resistances. So, in this context, we can objectively state that the concept of the self acquires a new perspective. Nevertheless, this perspective to some extent valorizes the loss of autonomy and authority. And thus, we can say that quite paradoxically this stance is itself fraught with ideological ramifications.

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Arun Sharma's plays attempt to capture the social, cultural, and spatial changes, while placing the self in perpetual flux. The playwright forces dissolution of traditional spatial identities and attempts their reconstitution along new lines. Most of Arun Sharma's plays signify how power works in a society and how resistances to it are articulated. In the discursive formulations of power, the "subject" is constantly "subjectified" or "subjugated" by the society at large. Although power is insidious it is fraught with some external factors of resistance that unsettle it. Moreover, the plurality of resistance produces social cleavage and fractures power's hegemonic coherence. The effect is the generation of new groups who might in turn produce new methods of resistance. For instance, domination could be one form of power that eventually manifests in every walk of life and seeks legitimacy. Modes of power define the legitimate answers to questions like what counts as a person, what counts to be gendered, or what rights a citizen has. Correlatively, the "subject" is formed by power, resistance, and freedom. Says Foucault,

.... in order for power relation to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides .... This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing situation), there would be no power relations at all (1997: 292).

There is an apparent paradox that resistance does not only disrupt power; but sometimes it serves the ends of domination more than it inhibits it. In *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* (1961), resistance serves as a form of social ontology from the start. Nibaran's death is symbolic of the resistance operating extensively through the social network. In this context, the suicidal step of the protagonist Nibaran has dual significance. Firstly, Nibaran has an emancipatory aspiration of reducing the asymmetrical form of domination to a minimum. Eventually, it proves fatal to him. Secondly, his critical and creative metamassage is delivered, but to some empty chairs not occupied by anyone. This failure of the message constrains and entraps him in asymmetrical relations and binds him to a range of possibilities. In complex terms, Nibaran's case proves that resistance does not always subvert domination, but on the contrary, is often taken over and exploited in such a way as to increase domination. Thus, Nibaran's emancipatory resistance turns into a form of compliance.

Sukanta, in *Purush* (1964) curiously enough, epitomizes the fact that when power functions more effectively, the less visible it is. Disillusioned by Hiramoni's deceptive appearance, initially he helps in serving rather than subverting power. For him resistance is just a mere disguise that hides the insidious spread of normalizing processes. He becomes the delirious "abnormal" person whose destabilizing physical and mental activities take the form of a threat to Hiramoni and others. He is the madman in the prison. This is an instance of ironic reversal because Sukanta confines himself in an old cage to resist the illegal interests of the



dominant groups. He chooses to be a part of the prison system being propelled by a functionalist drive towards self-preservation and self-enhancement. Sukanta's insanity is the result of the social system, but it is also a part and a construct of it. In spite of his sense of self-preservation, he fails to escape the exploitative aspects of power. The prison as a symbol of discipline if from Sukanta's point of view a safe place it is not so because the prison is controlled by the dominant power that could unsettle his self-derived premise of safety. On this understanding, domination proceeds according to discourses and practices that construct the "other" (like Sukanta) as less valuable than members of the dominant center (who control the discourse).

Michel Foucault talks about the social system that tries to make the bodies of children or soldiers more useful by valuing the mastery of the body gained through gymnastics, sports, exercise and drills. But he points out that at the same time the body may turn around and challenge other social norms and structures. Suddenly, what has made power strong becomes a means to attack it. Firstly, power invests itself in the body, but later on it finds itself exposed to a counter attack by the same body. Aditi and Nandini in *Aditi Atmokotha* (2000) Agnigarh (1996) respectively espouse the fact that the body itself is a site of power and resistance. Aditi's lived body is a position from which she criticizes the practices of manipulation and suppression. We can speculate that the pain which Aditi experiences is conditioned by the socio-historical interpretations of it. Aditi creates her experience from the raw materials of the past; but the analysis of the historical conditions also creates the links to truth, to rules and to the self. The body hence becomes a locus of embodiedness as transformable experiences depending on contexts and conditions. Aditi's points of resistance totally reshape her body in new configurations because at every moment the experiential self is lived differently in culture and history. Aditi's self is always open to the possibility of change, mutation and transformation. However, Aditi is not successful in her urge to go back to the past or to step out of the culture entirely, nor is she able to find the resources to save her from the destructive tendencies of the society. Thus, the play *Aditi Atmokotha* not only shows how individuals get programmed by the social institutions in which they find themselves, but also why they accept being programmed.

In *Agnigarh*, Nandini punishes herself by committing suicide. But the question is how are people made to accept the power to punish? Or quite simply, when punished, tolerate being so? Part of the answer concerns the use of "norms" in social institutions. For Nandini, the judges of normality are everywhere and it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based. Michel Foucault shows how each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements to the "norms." In general, Nandini is complicit in the process of her self-formation and eventually tries to normalize herself. With the intense confrontation with Atindra, Nandini realizes her so-called "abnormality" or "aberrance." Atindra makes her believe that she is a woman whose love for her father would not let any man to build a healthy relationship with her. She is prone to visualize every man as a shadow or clone of

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her dead father. Depending on resemblances and similarities with her father, Nandini judges a man to be a "real" one. But Nandini's constriction of possibilities occurs when the process of normalization blocks the many other viable forms of life. However, normalization asserts the norms as necessary, or natural, or universal. Being pushed to the margins of the society or being led to confront the so-called "aberrance" of her behaviour, Nandini discovers an efficient and convenient means to punish her. The pre-planned accident was an outcome of her machination. However, the critical resistance to normalization stems from the deflation of the tendency that there can be only one set (presumably, one's own) of normal, socially normed way to exist or that everything we do must be measured against such norms. The point is to challenge the social use of that very distinction, but not to make a better distinction between the normal and the abnormal. Although Nandini's body is only a postulant to explain the resistance to discipline and normalization, it would not make sense independent of historically contingent social practices. Atindra plays the role of her judge. As of we are living in a society whose configurations are based on pairs like the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the "social-worker" judge and so on.

Induction into a new kind of role remakes the self by discarding the previous version or reformulating it in new terms. This ostensible reformulation of the self appears to be required in circumstances like joining a new group of people, such as in an individual's change of social status, or passage into a different category of social membership. But this transformation leaves open the empirical question of whether, and to what extent, the self really is changed. Nari plays the role of four different women in *Aahar* (1964). Nari's performing self is basically a role-player; she clearly exploits the accumulated experience of a lifetime in the performance of any one role. We can therefore deduce that the character Nari becomes increasingly experienced as a performer. Moreover, social roles are grafted on to, inform and substantiate the self. The behaviour and identities of the four women, enacted by Nari, continue to be related to and are derived from their institutional contexts; whether these are conceptualized as "social structures" or as "cultural forms." Interestingly, it is impossible to neglect the extent which Nari is reflexively aware of the attempts made by the four men and others to shape her. The play *Aahar* exposes the agonizing clash between a person's sense of self and the identity imposed on her / him, a conflict which is essentially about who has the right to define an individual's identity. Moreover, the play reveals the importance of individuals as self-aware authors of their own social conduct and of the social forms in which they participate. This self-consciousness is a crucial and necessary condition of the sensitive understanding of the social relations. Nari, in turn, is also moulded by the experiences and perceptions of Dhiren, Nabin, Kamal and Nalini. Here, there is a message about the disconnection between self-knowledge and public perception of the self that becomes a personal crisis where the individual fails to recognize the difference.

In the play, Nari's self-consciousness is a means of focusing on her as well as other people's selves. Each of the four men does not know what she is seeing, but also realizes that his own experience is inadequate and inappropriate to make

sense of it. Over time, each learns that appearance is, if not an illusion, at best a superficial gloss on complex realities. The four men become aware of the ubiquity of change. Though change is shown as decay; nevertheless, it can also regenerate and reconstruct. Here, change is shown as a parallelism between a person's self-awareness and the sense s/he makes out of the world. The men's introspection and their construction of the world are to a large extent incongruent. They look at the "same" object and see different things; participate in the "same" event and experience quite differently. In the similar vein, their experience with the same character Nari is different. Strangely enough, our interpretations of what we witness around us proceed from our own experience, our consciousness of ourselves, even though we may not be conscious of its peculiarity.

Subject-formation or "assujettissement" has the additional technical meaning that can be translated as subjection, subjugation or subjectification. For Foucault, there is always a mode of subjectification involved in our self-understanding. In an interview in *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, Foucault defines the "mode of assujettissement" as: "the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations" (1997: 264). He shows that governmentalization is what "subjugates" or "subjectifies" people by defining for them the legitimate answers to questions of subjectivity. He points out two important issues in this context. Firstly, there is no such thing as a neutral subject; and neutrality is a myth. Secondly, he believes that subjects are manufactured in and through the processes and relations of domination. Foucault's genealogical approach marks out the fact that the fabrication of subjects does not exist prior to relations of domination. The approach is not that subjects produce domination, but that domination produces subjects. Using Nietzschean language, Foucault provides a critique for the desubjugation or desubjectivation of the subject. His critique dissolves our senses of who we are and disrupts our sense of what is the right thing to do. Following Nietzsche, Foucault defines critique as a functional mode which provides an alternative account of who we are and what we ought to do. The point of critique is to enhance the lives and the possibilities of individuals to allow them the space to try to create themselves as works of art. Therefore, domination should be resisted on the ground that it restricts the range of possibilities open to agents. This is possible only if the subjects constantly expose and challenge oppression. Likewise, in Arun Sharma's plays, the protagonists constantly destabilize the limits of the present order and represent a form of critical resistance to a power that, in Butler's words sets the limits to what a subject can 'be', but beyond which it no longer 'is'. This is what Butler has talked about in her book *Excitable Speech* (1997) when she places the subject at the cross section of power and resistance. But the ironical reverse, as shown by Butler, occurs when we define the social norms as the only possible context for resistance. These norms define who one is; and resisting these through insubordination puts one's own sense of which one is at risk. So, isn't the process of resistance and insubordination fraught with contradictions?

Arun Sharma's plays advance an identity politics according to which each oppressed group or individual is encouraged to narrate the experience of

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oppression. Others outside the group can never experience the feelings of this oppression. In the play *Kukurnesiya Manub* (1965), Romu, who speaks for the group, tells the history of his oppression. Others outside the group cannot relate to Romu as they cannot occupy the particular subject position and hence do not know what it is like to "be him." Not even Reema and Romu's mentor, the scientist Prof. Ashok Chaudhury can understand and follow Romu's narrative of oppression and seclusion. He develops a critique of existing society and alternatively posits a concept of a relative society fundamentally different from it. *Kukurnesiya Manub* celebrates difference as a framework within which the self re-makes and experiences its own understanding of oppression by reading and hearing narratives of other group members. What is more, it denies the possibility of uniting the groups' differences into common cause that begins to change overarching social structures. Romu aims for political mobilization; because it is the only attempt to "empower" minorities like him in the social mosaic. The sharp stone, according to Romu, will pave a way for the flourishing of individual initiative and fulfillment of economic and social opportunities. He turns into a rebel; and his self turns out to be the primary political agenda here. Romu's self-consciousness or self-awareness recognizes that social change cannot take place behind the backs of individuals; especially when it triggers social movements that are centered on various versions of identity politics. However, these social movements are primarily concerned to produce narratives enhancing and expressing victims' selfhood. The play shows that people's subject-positions are "inflected" (a soft word for "determined") by race, gender, and class; and though they are the primary structuring elements of people's oppression, they do not function as separate variables fragmenting people into different categories with unique identities. But rather they are so inextricably interwoven as to blur distinctions to the point of meaninglessness.

The conception of the ethical and the political that emerges in Arun Sharma's plays is intricately linked to the concept of "death." For Sharma, death is essentially a political issue. How can death be criticized if we cannot correct it? We know that death is inevitable and in this sense how can it be resisted? In *Identity and Difference* (1969), Heidegger says that only individualization that results from facing up to one's own death makes it possible for one to establish one's own identity and integrity in one's life. In *The Gift of Death* (1995), Derrida, on the other hand, says that the concept of death has no borders because it exceeds conceptual demarcation on closure. The question is whether this distinction between a concept and the reality of death can be drawn as a contested issue? Death is beyond the units of phenomenological description insofar as one's own experience of death cannot be explained because one is dead. Moreover, influenced by Philippe Aries's history of death, Derrida insists that death is central to the very idea of "culture." It is because with changing cultural contexts, national borders, currencies and languages, we also have the changing notions of death. The question is whether we are trivializing death by making it merely a social construction or valorizing it as a culturally variable phenomenon?

For Sharma, death is not so much a paradigm as an aporia, an unsolvable problem where the antitheses are undecidable. In *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya*, the

protagonist's death gives birth to an abrupt situation. While delivering the speech, Nibaran mounts up the stairs in huge leaps which leads to a broken ceiling. Technically, Nibaran's scream overlaps with Nandini's resonated "Deuta (father)." On further reading of the situation we can say that death is ultimately tied to a concern for ethics here. For Nibaran, the content of ethics has to come from the relation to one's death, which would have consequences for judgment about how we ought to live. Through death, Nibaran attempts to build a relationship with the world or the significant other. It is because death preserves individual authenticity, and maintains the tie between the self and the social community. For Aditi, death is a choice. It is something that participates with her in a common existence though it does not signify a harmonious relationship of communion or empathy. It is a matter of individual psychology and is relevant to the social. Nandini's death exhibits a streak of rebellion; as if it is exerted in the name of social emancipation. It provides an outlet for her pent-up emotions and feelings. However, in *Purush*, Hiramoni is strangled by her husband, the "insane" and delirious Sukanta. Hiramoni is the dictator who enforces rigid obligations on the "powerless" Sukanta. Sukanta's action is a justification to overcome the limits of oppression; and it embodies the ethical resistance of the "powerless." In *Aahut*, death is treated not only as a purely private and personal concern, but also as an inherently social and historical matter. This inference represents an appreciation of the centrality of death in the social and cultural analogies. Nari and the four men are obsessed with the concept of death. Nari is the dead woman whom the four men stole from the morgue and attempted to bury her in the city park. Interestingly, all the four men are portrayed in the light of "difference and alterity", because each of them cultivates his sense of the self by submitting differently to the dead woman Nari. Each of them has different interpretations of social duties, and normative engagements. Hence, the dead woman Nari provides coherence to the myriad narratives of the play. More abstractly, the playwright supports and respects differences and different idioms of articulation.

Death, according to Derrida, is singular and must be taken upon oneself; and this recognition of mortality as irreplaceability leads to responsibility and a sense of the self. Death is related to responsibility because everyone must assume his/her own death. On the other hand, a specific sense of the self evolves from the concept of death. Says Derrida:

The sameness of self, what remains irreplaceable is dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability (1993: 45).

Thus, in Sharma's plays "death" becomes one of the issues that is told differently, in multiple ways not inherently as superior or inferior to one another. His plays become a repertoire of competing, contrasting and/or supplementary "narratives" that have no privileged epistemological status or a superior position as a theory of knowledge. Thus, Arun Sharma's plays are polyvocal; so much so that they capture the flavour of local, interpersonal differences and varieties. He

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is alert to the dangers of simplistic, ideological thinking that reduce human liberation to programs and slogans. Thus, the self is considered as a mixture of the social, the moral and the political; a site where principles, systems, and values intersect and undercut each other. Here, the self is not a monolith that must be embraced or opposed in total; but is posited amidst acute contradictions, tensions, and tendencies.

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## PRESCRIBED/ PROSCRIBED: FOLK TALES FROM THE NORTH EAST AND THEIR HANDLING OF THE CONTENTIOUS

Santanu Phukan

**ABSTRACT.** *Folk literature has long been perceived of as no more than simple tales for the entertainment or edification of children. However, in their 'edification' component, these tales often prescribe or proscribe modes of behaviour that are either acceptable or not to the society that creates these tales. In the process, the values that a particular society lives by, its prescribed behavioural norms for men and women, its approval or disapproval of certain kinds of behaviour, and its ability or otherwise to face difficult questions relating to gender and other disturbing issues, become embedded in its discourse available as folk tales. The following paper seeks to reread folk tales (with emphasis on a particular folk tale from Goalpara) to try and discover how contentious issues of gender and rebellion are handled, and whether 'prescribed' routes for escape are at all possible.*

**Keywords:** *feminism, gender, society, folk culture, rebellion, domination, dissent, legitimacy, patriarchy, hierarchies, construct*

In the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie' Moraga, the co-editor, regrets, "Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of colour (run) to in droves."<sup>1</sup> (Moraga, Preface to the second edition) That, of course, may be true in terms of a gendered society of antiquity and of non-western thought and experience, where the ruling patriarchy had imposed mores of behaviour that are 'acceptable' and those that are 'not'. Yet it needs to be pointed out that third world literature does display modes of oppositional behaviour within the limited confines of paradigms that are sanctioned by authority.

Folk culture is often a repository of such oppositional behaviour and reveals an acceptable solution to voicing anger and other such emotions that might otherwise be considered subversive. This is so because folk culture provides escape

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routes through patterns of either the carnivalesque or of myth creation to effect a sufficient remove from actual life to make rebellion possible in a manner that it is not perceived of as rebellion. To illustrate this paradox, what is attempted in this paper is a close examination of a folk tale from the district of Goalpara, in Assam, *The Legend of Joymala*.

(It needs to be mentioned that the culture of Goalpara is unique because of its location between two different cultures, those of Bengal and Assam. As such, the folk culture of Goalpara displays facets that are both individual and unique as the 'shared factor'—in terms of what it 'shares' with Assam and Bengal—is uniquely metamorphosed into a culture that can only be stated as 'Goalporiya',—a fact that 'Goalporiyas' pride themselves on.)

The tale examined is *The Legend of Joymala*, a tale of a Brahmin woman whose husband marries another and turns his back on her. It begins with the portrayal of a happy couple whose happiness is underscored with the relating of how they feed the birds and the beasts from whatever little they have and how the creatures of the forest reciprocate their kindness by bringing for them the bounty of the forest. Soon, however, things turn awry as the husband goes to perform the final rites of a rich merchant from a neighbouring village. Lured with promises of wealth, he marries the spoilt daughter of the merchant, builds a beautiful house next to his earlier hovel where his first wife, Joymala, lives, and enjoys a lavish life with his new wife, making Joymala do all the housework like an unpaid *masham* and handing her scraps of leftovers. Joymala, of course, shares even this frugal pittance with the creatures of the forest. However, each day on the banks of the river, she weeps so very much that the waters turn salty. One day the king of the elephants tastes this saltiness and finds out the reason behind it. Moved by Joymala's sorrow, he offers to make her his queen and takes her to an enchanted waterfall with seven rivulets of seven colours, deep inside the forest. With these waters he turns her into a female elephant and his queen. The tale ends with the assertion that even today herds of wild elephants roam Goalpara and each herd is led by a female elephant.

Historically, the Brahmins were, before all, the prioritized caste on the caste-ladder—a contention proved by the fact that we have a plethora of tales that begin with "Once there was a poor Brahmin", while we have absolutely no stories that begin with "Once there was a poor 'Kshatriya', or 'Vaishya', or 'Shudra' (as though to state that it is not acceptable, or, perhaps 'common', for Brahmins to be poor. The casteist system plaguing the times is evidenced by this very simple, homespun evidence.) It is in the face of this that the fact of Joymala being a Brahmin acquires significance. That which is possible for a Brahmin woman, after all, in such a casteist context ('caste' including also questions of class and gender), throws up possibilities for all other women too.

Significant in the pattern of rebellion here are two aspects. Firstly, rebellion is only possible when one sacrifices one's status as a human being and moves on to a world where patriarchal modes of domination are either unquestioned, or unthreatened, or simply, irrelevant. Secondly, even that rebellion has to be aided by a male. In other words, a process of 'myth creation' offers a viable route for



voicing dissent because the remove from actual life thus effected, by prioritizing male authorial role (read elephant *king*), rids it of its essential subversive force. Moreover, by ensuring that the change is made possible by a male, albeit an elephant, the patriarchy is actually shown in the light of saviour, indeed 'justice' personified, and thus is dissent subsumed by the voice of authority.

Despite such constraints imposed by the ruling patriarchy, the significant aspect is the voicing of dissent itself. This, notably, has not been done by categorizing Joymala's husband as some kind of pariah or as an aberration of the norm. Men with two or more wives were, after all, not so very uncommon in days when folk tales were born. Rather, the resentment of the 'good wife' is prioritised—thus providing further leverage to the patriarchal authority while seeming to authorise rebellion. (In fact, in the tale, it is the spoilt daughter of the rich merchant—the second wife—who is shown to be the real villain of the piece, luring the good husband away from his first wife!) Let us not forget that the 'good wife' here, is characterised here by a subservient wife whose legitimate anger is sublimated into sorrow just because *only tears becomes a wronged woman*.

Satya P. Mohanty, in *The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity* quotes Scheman's example of Alice, who needs a support group of similarly situated females before she can come to terms with her own legitimate anger as legitimate<sup>2</sup>. That is because, among other moulding factors, literature has always played a major role in determining legitimacy or otherwise of female causes and concerns. Consider, for instance, the plight of Sita after her return to Ayodhya and the consequent *Agni-pariksha*, or that of Draupadi when her husband(s) loses / (lose) her at a game of dice and she is dragged in to the royal assembly to be stripped by Dushashana. In each of these cases the moral dilemma posed by the situation can be resolved only by an unquestioning acceptance of a husband's total control over his wife, morally and materially.

Yet, ancient texts do tend to subvert patriarchal causes and throw up disconcerting notions. I quote Gurcharan Das in *The Difficulty of Being Good*:

The attempted disrobing of Draupadi is a clear insult to womanhood. And this affront upset the cosmic balance of dharma. Hence, there were omens and they changed the story's outcome. According to an ancient dharma text 'Where women are honoured and worshipped all gods become pleased; if women are unnecessarily insulted, a great disaster must be on its way.' The fact that Draupadi had five husbands has troubled Indians for centuries. They have never quite accepted Karna's fantasy about Draupadi's extraordinary libido. Nor have they fully bought the ingenuous story of Kunti telling her sons to share her equally. Historically, it was common for men, especially kings, to have more than one wife, but for a woman to legitimately have multiple husbands was unheard of. (Das 43)

In other words, perhaps the *Mahabharata* is throwing a challenge to the reader's perception of the paradigm of patriarchy (although one might question the inclusion of the term "unnecessarily insulted" and ask "what is necessary?").

However, as far as a husband cannot become an elephant

Ancient texts are not only a superficial account of the crime but describes after T. S. Eliot's adamant and the timidity of the husband. In other words, all contrary to the woman—yet he is the deifying of woman as 'possessor'. Thus ruling patriarchy in these cultures, brides come to her father for a dowry. In the Islands, for example, and can be used

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Folk Tales, list of modes of acceptance role as perpetrator of gender, class, and more necessary. It constructing a parallel else is, to reveal or

In other forms prioritised over truth than any other. Truth passes from mother father to son. Truth predominating dharma centric. In *The Legend* the daughter of a

However, as far as *Joymala* is concerned, the protagonist's decision to have another husband cannot be accepted until and unless she changes her human entity and becomes an elephant, and consequently, non-human.

Ancient texts, too, have this disconcerting habit of prioritizing women at only a superficial level. Consider Twashtri's (*The Hindu Vulcan, Divine Artificer*) account of the creation of women. Mino Masani, in *Our Growing Human Family* describes after Twashtri how He takes such polar opposites as the hardness of adamant and the softness of the parrot's bosom, the cruelty of the tiger and the timidity of the hare, the warm glow of fire and the coldness of snow<sup>3</sup>—in other words, all contraries that would go on to the making of a goddess, to create woman—yet he ends with "and gave her to man". (Masani 32) In such a manner, the deifying of women runs parallel to the prioritizing of the male as 'owner' or 'possessor'. Thus is the right to consider women as 'possession' restored to the ruling patriarchy that is free to use her as it likes. [Let us not forget that in many cultures, brides could be bought (can still be, in some 'primitive' cultures) from her father for a price—say, a certain number of goats. In one of the Polynesian Islands, for example, a huge stone disc with a hole in the middle is used as currency and can be used for buying *one cow or three to four wives!*]

In *The Legend of Joymala*, however, the protagonist is allowed an escape route that enables her to have a different male partner. However, more importantly, the end of the tale assigns her a role of leadership—without reference to patriarchal hierarchies. In the process, what is established is an ability to face 'difficult' questions and find out unconventional answers to these.

This is certainly more *progressive*, albeit in a limited manner, from such works as, say, *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary* where the heroine's tragic end is a vindication of the patriarchal construct of what constitutes femininity. Then again, perhaps this is only possible because *Joymala's* story concentrates more on the heroine's emotional needs rather than on the sexual or physical. As Kate Millet discovered long ago, phallogocentric literatures have been notorious for their intolerance towards female sexuality.

Folk Tales, by the very fact of being so, have always had the role of preservation of modes of acceptable behavioural patterns thrust on their shoulders. Thus, in their role as perpetrators of these modes, is provided the readers' space to recover patterns of gender, class, rebellion and response. This makes a second look at folk tales all the more necessary. In other words, a second look at folk tales yields up possibilities of reconstructing a past of ensconced notions of class, gender, creed, hierarchy, and what else is, to reveal contrapuntal relations between the 'then' and 'now'.

In other folk tales from the North-east, too, it is always the male who is prioritised over the female. Two folk tales of the Khasis illustrate this point better than any other. This is so because the Khasis are a matrilineal society where property passes from mother to the (youngest) daughter (the 'Khadew'), instead of from father to son. Under the circumstances, one might legitimately expect the predominating discourse to be female prioritizing. Yet, even here, is power male-centric. In *The Legend of Ka Palsyntiew*, for instance, a young village lad marries the daughter of a God who has sent her to look after human beings. Our hero, of

course, knows her only as a beautiful lady who lives in a cave, and is unaware of her divine origins. Having borne her husband many clever and sturdy sons who will grow up to be capable kings, she reveals her true identity and returns to her father's home. Thereby is the role of the female once again circumscribed within the perimeter of providing her husband with fine sons *who will be the actual rulers—the actual inheritors and perpetrators of power*. (Let us not forget that the liberating possibilities of contraception and abortion are necessarily outside the realm of folk tales). *The Peacock and the Sun* tells the tale of the foolish peacock, husband of the Sun Goddess, who foolishly believes the field of blooming mustard to be a beautiful maiden dancing, and so, leaves the heavens for his new love on earth. As a result, all he has from the heavens now are the golden spots on his tail which are *the tears of his wife*. Like Joymala, even a goddess can only weep! Such constructs re-emphasize the need for women to be subservient and prioritize the patriarchy as both decision makers (even when the 'decision' is misbegotten and foolish) and as rulers, while women have a role that is inevitably passive, and unquestionably, weak.

This stereotyping of the male is parallel to the stereotyping of the female too. Therefore is a stepmother necessarily loveless, heartless and wicked in *Tejimola*, an Assamese folk tale, and in *The Hornbill Girl*, a Manipuri folk tale. Similarly are exceedingly captivating women necessarily supernatural as in such Khasi tales as *Ren and the River Nymph* or *The Legend of Ka Puhyntiew*—a hypothesis that condemns the human female to a naturally inferior status, unfit to be considered by a male for an equal partnership. Males, on the other hand, are clever as in *The Soothsayer* from Assam, or *Tseube* from Nagaland; decent as the rooster in *The Purple Crest* or *Ren and the River Nymph* from Meghalaya; all powerful as in *Lichaba: Creator of the Earth* of the Ao Nagas, or Thang Jing of *Ebethoi* of the Manipuris...

The net result is that a new look at folk tales has become necessary and urgent as that, which has always been held as the domain of children, has now proved to be formative influences that can corrupt or create—depending on what society decides to do with it's literature, so long perceived of as 'innocuous'. As has been pointed out, folk tales, as repository of cultural constructs, have a wealth of information to be retrieved by rereading them for what they actually are, rather than regarding them as tales meant to merely amuse (edify?) children. After all, even Enid Blyton's 'Noddy' books, the present author grew up with in his 'nursery' days, have proved to be a veritable hot-bed of racial prejudice, thanks to this 'rereading'. Need one say any more?

NB. All folk-tales referred to here are to be found in *First Sun Stories*, Katha, New Delhi (2005)

Notes:

1. *The dream of a unified Third World feminist movement in the country as we conceived of it when we first embarked on the project of this book, seemed more possible somehow, because as of yet, less tried.... In the last three years I have learned that Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of color*

- are running who have cc us.: Moraga Color Prefa Kitchen Ta*
2. *Consider S in the safe a recognize th In fact, they her situatio come to ack feelings of a in this situ now asked something s (the anger) it, and the picture. She guilt, and s socially pro (Alice) as h recognized be angry?' often takes one's discov a political "discovers" feelings of a and clarity. is derived fr and social (Scheman, in Literatu Furman. †*
  3. *"He took th of the tend bloom of flc and the gla sunbeams, of the hare, the hardne the warm & cooing of th and compo Minoo: O*

are running to in droves. We are not so much a "natural" affinity group, as women who have come together out of political necessity. There are many issues that divide us.: Moraga, Cherrie/ *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* Preface, Second Edition Ed. Moraga, Cherrie' and Anzaldua, Gloria. Kitchen Table Women of Color Press (1984) Print

2. Consider Scheman's example, Alice, who joins a consciousness-raising group and in the safe and supportive environment provided by other women like her learns to recognize that her depression and guilt, though sincerely felt, may not be legitimate. In fact, they hide from her her real needs and feelings, as well as the real nature of her situation. "The guilt and depression," the group might argue and Alice might come to acknowledge, "are a response to and a cover for those other feelings, notably feelings of anger. Alice is urged to recognize her anger as legitimate and justifiable in this situation" (177). Here is where the "political" nature of the views Alice is now asked to ponder comes in: she is not seen as merely bringing to the surface something she, as a lone individual, knew and felt all along. Rather, her emotion (the anger) is constituted in part by the "views" about the world, about herself in it, and the details of what is acceptable and unacceptable in this new theoretical picture. She comes to experience anger by reinterpreting her old feelings of depression, guilt, and so on, but she does so unavoidably with the aid of theory, an alternative, socially produced construction of herself and the world. Now, "we may describe [Alice] as having discovered that she had been angry, though she hadn't previously recognized it. She would, in fact, have denied it if she were asked: 'Why should I be angry?' It is significant," Scheman goes on, "that a denial that one is angry often takes the form of a denial that one would be justified in being angry. Thus one's discovery of anger can often occur not from focusing on one's feelings but from a political redescription of one's situation" (177). The reason we say that Alice "discovers" she has been angry is that the anger underlay her vague or confused feelings of depression or guilt; now it organizes these feelings, giving them coherence and clarity. And our judgment that the anger is deeper than the depression or guilt is derived from (and corroborated by) our understanding of Alice's changing personal and social situation, an understanding that is based in part on a "theory." (Scheman, Naomi. "Anger and the Politics of Naming." *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. Ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman. New York: Praeger, 1980. 1974-87.) Print
3. "He took the rotundity of the moon, and the curves of the creepers, and the clinging of the tendrils and the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of the reed, and the bloom of flowers, and the lightness of leaves, and the tapering of the elephant's trunk, and the glances of the deer, and the clustering of rows of bees, and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of the winds, and the timidity of the hare, and the vanity of the peacock, and the softness of the parrot's bosom, and the hardness of adamant, and the sweetness of honey, and the cruelty of the tiger, and the warm glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of the kokila, and the hypocrisy of the crane, and the fidelity of the chakravaka; and compounding all these together he made woman, and gave her to man." Masani, Minoos: *Our Growing Human Family* OUP India (1950) Print

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## CONFLICT IN THE SHORT STORIES OF DR BHABENDRA NATH SAIKIA — A SELECTIVE READING

*Stuti Goswami*

**ABSTRACT.** *This paper looks at two short stories by Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia—'Gobbor' and 'Sringkhol'—each distinctive in its theme and setting. Through a reading of these two stories this paper seeks to probe into 'conflict' as dwelt upon by the writer particularly in the context of the society the protagonists exist in. An intense struggle between oppositional forces, conflict in the short stories of Dr. Saikia reveals the writer's deep empathy and understanding of the functionings of the human mind—and of the complicated matrix of society and culture that conditions and shapes a person, and even, his destiny.*

*Keywords: conflict, Gobbor, Sringkhol, society, community, power, culture, circumstances, Mr. Piyenaar, Mr Smith, Mary, Ambika, Kalidas, pigeons*

Teacher, filmmaker, short story writer, novelist, editor, playwright, a great visionary, Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's short stories reveal an intricate engagement with humanity and realism—elevating them from mere reflections to invocations of the humbled, the hungry, the broken-hearted, the victim of power equations swathing society. In Dr. Saikia's short stories, we are presented with a 'microscopic' observation of human society—portraying life in its flitting fleeting sensations, momentary twitches of vulnerability; enlivening in the reader emotions in their sincerest hues. Though most of the stories are based in the middle-class and lower-middle class, often rural, Assamese society, there is a smaller segment in Dr. Saikia's oeuvre based on foreign soil, which however is fragranced with human emotions in a way that stripped to its bare emotional self, an unfamiliar world poses no barrier to the comprehension of the Assamese reader.

Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia's short stories are characterized by a remarkable simplicity of language and a conventional narrative. Everything—from the choice of character names to the description of the setting to the characters' utterances—

is picked from the everyday life. And yet it is Dr. Saikia's touch that lends artistic magic to ordinary experience. Though the stories deal with essential human(e) issues, Dr. Saikia is never preachy or didactic in his tone. His characters' heroisms are the confrontations of the ordinary man with his circumstances and the ambient culture he finds himself/herself in.

Of course, a detailed discussion of Dr. Saikia's short stories is beyond the constraints of this paper. For which purposes, this writer has taken two short stories for consideration—'Gohbor' and 'Sringshol'. While 'Gohbor' was written in 1968 and published in the anthology *Gohbor* in 1969, 'Sringshol' was written in 1970 and published in his 1975 anthology *Sringshol*. These two stories present two contrasting societies, and yet, share a common theme of conflict albeit in their diverse shades. 'Gohbor' (literally meaning 'Cavern') is set in a racist era, in a society and time divided along what W.E.B. Du Bois would term the 'colour line'. This story explores and questions racism and societal pressures despite man's scientific advancements, thus making it probably the only story of its kind in Dr. Saikia's fictional oeuvre. On the other hand 'Sringshol' (meaning 'Fetter') based in a(nother) nondescript village in Assam, peeks into the conflicts a young widowed mother has to face in the advent of hunger of the flesh.

Put in simple terms, conflict is a state of disharmony. It may be internal, external or relational: respectively conflict within oneself, with forces without or in relationships between individuals. Conflict offers a perspective into the individual(s) and/or the community concerned—especially in the context of the social, political or material inequality between different social groups, which critique the broad socio-political system, or which otherwise detract from ideological conservatism, drawing attention to the power disparities, and the ideological aspects inherent in traditional thought. In narrative, conflict plays the important role of offering dialectic between oppositional// opposing forces which are intrinsically tied, with a strained relation that carries the plot forward.

In *Culture and Society*, British cultural materialist Raymond Williams observes that society is not only the bearer and creator of values, but also the destroyer of values and communities. Viewed from that perspective, an individual's relation to his society, the society he lives in, might be deemed constrained and conflicting. Individual opinion is constantly under surveillance from, and sought to be submerged into, the Widely Accepted. Since acceptance stems from wielding of power, it follows that the Powerful conditions the generation and acceptance of opinions, ideologies and traditions. Consequently, variances which are deemed Divergences are sought to be silenced, all the while as the Widely Accepted, morphing into the Powerful seek to contour and repress the Divergent, thereby making them the 'marginal'. The Accepted (ideologies and traditions) become such a pervasive presence, that the individual has to struggle to make his voice heard. In such a context, society emerges as a Foucauldian Panopticon where the individual constantly feels the gaze of unseen yet overwhelming forces.

Both 'Gohbor' and 'Sringshol' present the conflict in which the protagonists cannot escape the certain life and circumstances they are thrust into. Their

ideologies and the context of the

In 'Gohbo quadrangle. Poor less-privileged—invisible presence—jaws of death, character around patient, Mr. Piy Campbell successfully injured

Almost for ten other patients deteriorated state the last days of illumination—his field, an extremely palpating heart Piyenaar's affliction throbbing with and eighteen days body had welcomed Galpa aru Silpa

Sadly how society. Anyway, car, amidst wide Amidst all this, heart it was that Piyenaar meets: she is "...Mary,

Mr. Piyenaar  
"Smith?"

"Yes yes Sir. injured in a car. ('Gohbor', Galpa

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"...Every a near. I want to be Smith's heart is to ...I had often run same heart now to. how can my Smithy, eager eyes. ('Gohbor', Galpa

ideologies and their circumstances clash in an excruciating way—particularly in the context of the society they live in.

In 'Gohbor' power, class, domination and exploitation form a dangerous quadrangle. Power stems from class. The privileged class seeks to dominate the less-privileged—the 'other(s)' which assumes the form of exploitation. Such is the invisible presence of the societal forces that a person, even when saved from the jaws of death, cannot live life as he desires. Such is the tale of Mr. Piyenaar, the character around whom the short story 'Gohbor' revolves. In this story a heart patient, Mr. Piyenaar's life is miraculously saved when his doctor, the famous Dr. Campbell successfully implants into his body the heart of a young man who was seriously injured in a car accident. As we read at the beginning of the story—

Almost four months ago, Mr. Piyenaar had arrived at this hospital, like ten other patients, suffering from a disease of the heart. His condition had deteriorated steadily, and there was a time, when the doctors began counting the last days of his life. It was just then, that Dr. Campbell had a moment of illumination—a strange inspiration out of his years of dedicated efforts towards his field, an extraordinary wisdom—a superhuman ability: he came upon the palpitating heart of a thirty year old youth, almost dead in an accident. Mr. Piyenaar's afflicted, useless heart was removed, and in its place the new heart, throbbing with life, of that thirty year old, was implanted. That was a hundred and eighteen days ago. During this period, each of the veins in Mr. Piyenaar's body had welcomed the new heart, accepting it as one of their own. ('Gohbor', Galpa aru Silpa, p.342)

Sadly however, this 'acceptance' above does not find space in Mr. Piyenaar's society. Anyway, Mr. Piyenaar survives to return home with his wife in his white car, amidst widespread media coverage, hundreds of onlookers and much fanfare. Amidst all this, no one, not even Mr. Piyenaar himself pauses to think whose heart it was that had given him a new lease of life. One evening however Mr. Piyenaar meets a dark skinned lady in the park near his home. She tells him that she is "...Mary, Smith's wife".

Mr. Piyenaar is surprised

"Smith?..."

"Yes yes Smith." Mary grew visibly unsettled—"My husband Smith, who was injured in a car accident; the doctors cut away his heart and put it in your body." ("Gohbor", Galpa aru Silpa, p.346)

This knowledge leaves Mr. Piyenaar confused and uncomfortable. After some time, Mary expresses her desire—

"...Every day I have seen you from afar. But I want to see you, feel you from near. I want to be with you, talk to you... I am shattered, sir. I have no one else. But Smith's heart is throbbing inside you. We believe that a man's soul resides in his heart. ...I had often run my fingers over his chest, where his beautiful loving heart lay. That same heart now throbs inside you, it is keeping you alive. If the heart itself has survived, how can my Smith die?" Mary looked towards Mr. Piyenaar's face in the dark, with misty, eager eyes. Mr. Piyenaar blurted out, "It's quite late now. I'll meet you later." ("Gohbor", Galpa aru Silpa, p.346)



Mr. Piyenaar does not know what to do, but within, he suffers immeasurably. For, ideologically he has always believed in the superiority of this class, the fair-skinned race. In fact, before his ailment he had been actively involved with a club whose members believed that—

*One cannot claim rights over a place simply because one had been born, there. Thousands of monkeys are born into some woods, but those woods never belong to those monkeys. Numerous black skinned men and women were born in this country, and because they were born, they died. They did nothing else... Therefore, this civilized race, which had, despite migrating from other lands, built this country, through sheer toil and sacrifice; elevated this country from the deep caverns of darkness... this race, and this race alone had the right to rule this land... In between these two colours of the human skin lay God's verdict... and to uphold that holy verdict was the sacred duty of the likes of Mr. Piyenaar. ('Gohbor', Galpa aru Silpa, p.344)*

Ironically, it is one from the same supposedly debased ranks, from those deeper caverns of darkness that gives white Mr. Piyenaar a new lease of life. And now, with the awareness of the black pumping heart inside him Mr. Piyenaar loses all sleep.

*He felt as if his veins and arteries could not tolerate the sheer power of that blood speed; especially those two veins at his temples, as if the nerves in his brain would burst any moment; he suffered from intense anguish...*

Even if for a while, Mr. Piyenaar desired the flow of blood to cease; especially towards his brain.

*Next morning, Mr. Piyenaar looked ashen. Standing before the mirror, he stared at his image, with unblinking eyes. Was the colour of his face, and his body, turning black? Because of that blood pumping machine, would he now become like Smith? ('Gohbor', Galpa aru Silpa, p.349)*

Unfortunately when he shares this with his wife—

*Mrs. Piyenaar hissed like an angry snake. What would he do now?... he restlessly moved around the house.*

...  
Somehow, Mr. Piyenaar realized, his wife hated him. She was terrified of him; that meant, had his face already morphed into something frightening? Something that would scare people at night? He remembered—in the club, at his office, on the road, people spoke behind him in whispers; people gazed at him with strange eyes. That gaze was unbearable.

*Mr. Piyenaar wanted to hide himself from all these people. He was increasingly scared of their gazes. And each time, another face would swim in his mind—Mary's eyes—beseeching, teary, helpless. Even Mary's gaze scared him. But there was no hatred in them, those eyes weren't terrifying. All of a sudden, Mr. Piyenaar felt like visiting Mary. Where did she live? How far was that? Lying on his bed, Mr. Piyenaar looked in the direction of the other bed at the far end of the bedroom—at least not as far!*

*('Gohbor', Galpa aru Silpa, p.350-52)*

But when he visits Mary, he is openly castigated by the members of his own club. Worse still, he is excommunicated—from his own society, his own office, his own family. And Mr. Piyenaar suffers.—

*...Hard. Very hard. It is very difficult to do.*

*Mr. Piyenaar is small. Our chest gave compassion. So very little. Been simply a blood pump.*

*Mr. Piyenaar—the human race—stood. He continued speaking loneliest, the most he fingers across his hair. nice dress. Put Smith's given by his own club,*

By then, Mrs. 1 ('Gohbor', Galpa aru

He visits Mary. 'mysterious death, and not excluding his own

'Gohbor' is the politics that can play its own prejudices. I societal ideologies, id Piyenaar thus emerg powerful, to one of t struggle with himself surveillance—and of the first few passages all too powerful a pre of and for the wife c personas—Smith an heightens the conflic Belonging to the mar likes of Dr. Campbel heart into the Mr. I advancement'. Thus, external—the extern protagonist's relation

In his short sto Ambika, a young mo afloat in the face of g pigeons in Ambika's li moments of turbulen in a grand public mee manages to capture fo children want to have

...Hard. Very hard. When one of the organs in your own body turns a stranger, it is very difficult to endure.

Mr. Piyenaar spoke, immersed in his own thoughts—"Small, so small, very small. Our chest caverns are very small to accommodate a heart filled with love, compassion. So very less space. Therefore, I am at such pain. Indeed, had the heart been simply a blood pumping machine, it would not have been difficult..."

Mr. Piyenaar—the world famous patient, the embodiment of the advances of the human race—stood up. He roamed about aimlessly within the room, unsettled. He continued speaking, as if in a delirium—"The greatest disabled in the world, the loneliest, the most helpless, the creature without a heart"—and unsteadily ran his fingers across his hair. He remained standing for some time. After that, he put on a nice dress. Put Smith's address card inside his coat pocket. Took out a revolver, once given by his own club, and walked out.

By then, Mrs. Piyenaar had taken away his car, his driver to the office. (Gohbor', *Galpa aru Silpa*, p.353-54)

He visits Mary. While returning from this visit however Mr. Piyenaar dies a mysterious death, and as the story teller hints, at the behest of his own people, not excluding his own wife and Dr. Campbell.

'Gohbor' is the tale of a prejudiced culture and a cultural-ideological power politics that can play the game of subversion to any extent for the fulfillment of its own prejudices. It is the story of one man's futile fight with the accepted societal ideologies, ideologies he had himself once contributed in generating. Mr. Piyenaar thus emerges as a 'shifter'—whose position shifts from that of the powerful, to one of the repressed. Of course, this is not without a fair share of struggle with himself—for the unconscious conditioning is in itself a constant surveillance—and of course with his society. However, though he is dead within the first few passages of the story, and utters not a word, Smith's absence becomes all too powerful a presence to be overlooked. As Mr. Piyenaar thinks increasingly of and for the wife of the man who had to die so that he could live, the two personas—Smith and Mr. Piyenaar emerge as reflectors of one another. This heightens the conflict within Mr. Piyenaar. Smith is in fact the silence(d) hero. Belonging to the marginals of a White culture, Smith's life holds no value for the likes of Dr. Campbell. What matters is a successful implantation of a Smith's heart into the Mr. Piyenaar's and thereby 'inaugurating a new era in man's advancement'. Thus, as it emerges the conflict in this story is both internal, and external—the external impinging on the internal, which has its impact on the protagonist's relation with his own society.

In his short story 'Sringkhol' the conflict is focused on the protagonist Ambika, a young mother of five. Widowed, and struggling to keep her family afloat in the face of grinding poverty, 'Sringkhol', presents the arrival of a set of pigeons in Ambika's life, which lead her, like links in a chain, to a series of intense moments of turbulent conflict within herself. The pigeons had been set to flight in a grand public meeting near her village, to spread the message of peace. Ambika manages to capture four such birds, and brings them home. At home, the hungry children want to have a meal of pigeon meat, while she feels selling the birds in

the market would fetch home some money, with which she can buy a few essential commodities. At the same time, she is afraid of being caught with the birds, for the entire village would know the source. The story portrays Ambika's fight for sustenance in the face of the changing circumstances in her life that follow the arrival of these birds. On the other hand, hovering on the periphery of her world, and constantly endeavouring to make his presence increasingly felt is Kalidas, who once supposedly had feelings for Ambika, but had 'allowed' his friend Nilakanta to marry her. And now, widowed, struggling youthful Ambika arrests Kalidas's roving eye, who makes his intentions for her clear enough to make Ambika uncomfortable in his presence. The story opens—

*Kalidas' presence before Ambika arouse in her a feverish animation, like that of a fisherman catching a water snake in his bait. ('Srīngkhōl', Galpa aru Silpa, p.425)*

Throughout the story, we witness Ambika thwarting Kalidas's advances, all along waging a battle in her thoughts about the fate of the pigeons. In the story, pigeon's meat is used as a powerful symbol for human (the woman's) flesh. Simultaneously, it symbolizes Ambika's vulnerability. Her economic condition and her dilemma gradually bind her in an invisible iron-like fetter—

*"Why wouldn't the pigeons sell? They would. There will be someone who understands the value of pigeon meat. You know something, Ambika?"*

*Ambika looked into Kalidas' eyes.*

*"Pigeon meat is so warm"—pausing for a moment, Kalidas went on in a strange voice, "It's hard bearing the warmth of that meat all alone, you know."*

*Not a word escaped Ambika's lips. She could gradually feel something enfold her firmly. A strange niggling sensation, a flutter spread all over her body. Was this how they felt when a snake draped itself around? But then, she felt no fear! The snake's slithering touch did not leave her shivering. Instead she could feel her body grow warmer. Was it because of all the talk of pigeon meat?" ('Srīngkhōl', Galpa aru Silpa, p. 440)*

*After a slightly longer pause, Kalidas said, "Ambika, I've thought of something. Let me buy the pigeons. I'll buy whatever else is required—potatoes-onions-garam masala. Let's have a nice meal at your house tonight."*

*"What have you decided, Ambika? Let's have a meal. Come. Ambika, just see how it tastes?"*

*Ambika, sat stifled, silenced their bodies touching each other in the dark... Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead, and the nape of her neck*

*"It's decided then. Just wait for a while. I'll return at once."*

*Saying this, Kalidas hurried away to buy potatoes-onions- garam masala.*

*Wiping her face and neck with the edge of her sador, Ambika tried to move a little. At once, she could feel a number of muscles ripple all over her body. A frission shook her like never before, as if someone was shaking a pitcher of water, more-than-half-filled. It seemed as if all these days she hadn't noticed she had so much flesh in her body.*

*With unblinking eyes she stared at the spot where the pigeons had been kept till some time ago. Hmm? Let it be. If the pigeons, alighting in her world, amidst the sounds of doba-conch shell-bells-ululations, wanted to give her some bit of happiness after all—!" ('Srīngkhōl', Galpa aru Silpa, p.440-441)*

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However, eventually, Ambika does not surrender to the lure of the pigeon's meat, nor to Kalidas'. She sells off the birds to the volunteers of the same meeting (who urgently need a few more pigeons) at a lower rate. Of course, not without experiencing a few intense moments of deliberations—

*All the blood in her body seemed to accumulate in Ambika's mind. Once again, her face and neck were damped with sweat. Using all the energy of her body and mind, once again Ambika seemed engaged in a fierce battle with some formless overpowering force.*

*"Tell me, how much shall I pay?"*

*Ambika looked at the boy with pleading eyes.*

*"Hmm? How much?"*

*Swallowing her spittle, Ambika replied in an indistinct voice, "two rupees a pair."*

*Once again, Ambika wiped her face and neck with the edge of her saador.*

Thus, in a subtle, masterful way, the writer presents the niggling sensuousness beneath Ambika's unostentatious body. As a mother, a widowed mother, her identity has been trapped in her daily battles to fend for her family; Kalidas' advances awaken in her tints of her sense of herself, and her body. At the same time, it throws her into an ethical dilemma. As mentioned above, the pigeons embody Ambika's entrapped and vulnerable existence, wherein she constantly has to fight the demons within. The conflict in this story is thus internal—enacted in the battleground of the protagonist's mind. However, Ambika's struggle is also with the society she lives in; such a society would never accept a widowed mother having a relationship with another man. Even if Ambika forays into such territory, if not for anything else but at least to alleviate her poverty; society, that panopticon would return and resurrect itself to stifle and stigmatize her. This leaves Ambika stranded in a moral and emotional dilemma. Though she remains silent (silenced?) much of the time, the reader hears her voice, and the voice that emerges is a defiant one.

Conflict is a pervasive phenomenon that pervades multiple levels of societal processes. The constituents of a society—its norms, its traditions, its institutions—are constantly undergoing change. The individual changes have a profound impact on the relation between these constituents as well as on the inhabitants of that society. In the immediate context of the two stories discussed above the protagonists, thrust into a certain life and certain circumstances, cannot escape, desire as they may and are forced to fight their circumstances; which gives rise to the conflict. In portraying the conflict, Dr. Saikia reveals a deep understanding of the functionings of the human mind. Out of such conflict, and struggle, the embattled protagonists arise ennobled.

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## NIRMALPRABHA BORDOLOI: POETRY AND THE SPIRITUAL QUEST

*Dhrubajyoti Das*

**ABSTRACT.** *Although research pursuits in the sphere of literature have made encouraging headway in India, the same cannot always be said to be true of Assamese literature, particularly poetry. In fact, there are diverse sources and aspects of this genre of Assamese literature that demand a comprehensive study. The present endeavour, therefore, springs from the belief that there is ample room for a work to unfurl the latent treasure of Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, a leading figure of modern Assamese poetry who despite her seminal contribution to the growth of Assamese poetry, is yet to receive the kind of treatment she rightfully deserves. Like many other Assamese poets of genius, her talent also has not been explored and exploited the way it should have been. This calls for persistent undertakings in comparative and contrastive study of the various aspects of her poetry with many of her western counterparts. As a humble attempt in this direction, therefore, this paper underlines her poetic quest and contour with prima-facie focus on spiritual imperatives as reflected through different parameters such as Nature, Love, Life and Death.*

**Keywords:** *Assamese, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, spirituality, philosophy, nature, love, life, woman, sense, emotion, body, soul*

Assamese poetry has not only been a veritable repertoire of traditions and values of the heterogeneous cultures of greater Assam, but has also contributed significantly to the distinctive stream of Indian thought and philosophy. There is not an iota of doubt that the depth and range of the rich cultural heritage of our country could be realized by the frontline dignitaries of literature and philosophy abroad, across the centuries precisely because of its spiritual essence. In the same way, Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, popularly known as 'The Nightingale of Assam', too has been able to successfully uphold in her poetry, the same consciousness, underscoring some common characteristics of variegated Indian culture and

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tradition. Nirmalprabha, who occupies a significant place in the history of modern Assamese literature with her kind of spiritual orientation, infuses into her poetry a new sense of freedom and newness of style and form. Ever since the time she was in the seventh standard, when her father initiated her to the '*Madbhagavat Gita*,' this great philosophical epic became for Nirmalprabha a lifelong companion, satisfying her need for spirituality even in the midst of the direst upheavals of her life, when darkness and despair would threaten to tear her being asunder. In fact, her 'self' came to be totally devoted to *Karma*- a philosophy of *Bhagavat Gita* - through which she could obtain *Jnana* (wisdom), which is capable of bridging human thought with the whole soul. This spiritual preoccupation became so much an integral part of her poetic creed that she came to be recognized as a poet of spiritual sensibility.

The life of Nirmalprabha Bordoloi is the life of a true artist. As a poet she was greatly indebted to the two great Bengali poets, viz., Rabindranath Tagore and Jivanananda Dash. Rabindranath, especially, as in the case of most post-Rabindranath Indian poets, influenced Nirmalprabha's poetic exploits greatly, both in terms of language and content. Among the western poets she was greatly struck by Ezra Pound (1885-1972). What attracted Nirmalprabha most was Pound's individualistic and humanistic approach. Apart from these, Nirmalprabha earned her creative fabric and the leitmotiv of her poetry through her contact with the greats of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T S Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Rilke and many other English-American poets. Scholars have also deliberated on the striking similarity between Nirmalprabha's inclination towards the mystic, transcendental philosophy of India and Ralph Waldo Emerson's development of a similar theme through his concept of the 'Over Soul' and Self Reliance.' There is a clear indication that Nirmalprabha espouses a close affinity with Emerson while celebrating the 'self' in one of her outstanding poems 'Mor Ukti' (My words). Another poem 'Ranga Powalar Mani' (Red Gem) echoes similar concerns with regard to Emerson's 'Brahma' which overtly reflects the Vedanta philosophy in its form and content. Emerson's vision of 'Brahma' is ubiquitous:

They reckon ill who leave me out  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter of the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings. (Samuelson 34)

Nirmalprabha in 'Ranga Powalar Mani' allows an adopted impression of the Emersonian notion:

I am the trust  
I am the assurance  
I am the impulsive smell of dream  
I am the alluring zeal of beauty  
I am the echo of prayer for the deity. (trans. mine)

This apparently echoes further the following lines of the *Gita*:

I am the ritual action  
 I am the sacrifice  
 I am the ancestral ablation  
 I am the sacred hymn  
 I am also the melted butter...  
 I am immortality and also death. (Samuelson 35)

Critics are of the opinion that Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, who belongs to the second phase of Assamese literature, is not only one of the outstanding poets of the literature of the region but also deserves to be placed among the major women poets in the national arena. True, she did not write in English but her art tolerates no linguistic barriers and appropriates the familiar features of mainstream Indian poetry subsumed in the songs of Nature, Love, Life, Death and Destiny. Though the range of her topics underlines her versatility, their essence is predominantly spiritual. Consequently, the present study is an attempt at probing the spiritual quest in her poetry through a selection of some of her major poems.

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi is a great lover of Nature, and like Wordsworth, she finds the source of such love in the local and the regional. Ever since her first appearance as a poet, she has been demonstrating her vigor and verve as a nature poet through an ingenious depiction of the objects of nature from her motherland, the very soil of Assam. Yet her attitude to Nature is somewhat different and does not fall into a clear system of philosophy as Wordsworth's pantheistic belief in Nature does. Unlike Wordsworth, Nirmalprabha seems to have no faith in Nature as a guide for moral behavior. All the same, like Wordsworth, she too can hear in Nature the 'still, sad music of humanity' as she tries to conceptualize in her nature lyrics, the harmony between man and Nature through an impassioned mystical approach. In one of her famous poems, 'Etar Pichat Etakoi' (One by One) the poet seeks to affirm her camaraderie with nature:

One by one /All the Stars  
 Have gone...  
 Leaving/ My dumb heart  
 A gate-keeper/For the dark night. (Barua, Bhaben 250)

As a modern poet with a romantic inclination Nirmalprabha is much closer to Keats than to Wordsworth. Like Keats, she is a poet of the senses. Her romantic bent does not lag behind that of Keats' evocation of 'autumn' while eulogizing the seasonal bliss during the month of *Bohag* (April-May) or the other months of the Assamese calendar. Her senses culminate in a spiritual passion and turn artistically enough, into symbols that often endorse the man-nature reciprocity. In 'Bashisthat Duparia' (Noon at Bashistha), for instance, she posits a spiritual

conflict that forms  
 human world:

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 In the wheel  
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conflict that forms the web of a mysterious link between the human and the non-human world:

My soul submerged  
In the wheeze of the forest  
In the cavern of the rocks  
In the wild-creepers

In the leaves of the tall-trees  
As substantiation  
The silent noon remains lynching. (translation mine)

The poem immediately reminds us of the alluring effect in Wordsworth's famous lyric, "Lines Written in Early Spring":

To her fair works did nature link  
The human soul that through me ran.

For Nirmalprabha, then, Nature is an instrument through which she generates her feelings for poetic perfection. For example, in the poem 'Khajuraho' she transmutes the physical nature of objects into a kind of metaphysical sensibility by conjuring up some splendid images and symbols. The result is, the poem is not less effective than the sumptuous and spiritual appeal of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Nirmalprabha, again, has also succeeded in writing a few poems that tend to assert her consciousness of Indian existentialism. And this existential stance is entrenched in spirituality in a way that it generates her ideology with regard to the emancipation of women. As a woman poet her mental trauma emanating from the prevailing ambience finds reflection in her cynical attitude towards loneliness parallel to her fear to face the crowded place. In 'How Long' the poet concedes the fact in her apposite words:

How long shall I keep/ Holding up this face  
Without its getting ugly/In this crowded place?

Oh my face-about to/Get ugly  
Oh my hand-about to /Fall down  
Oh my golden light/Waning down  
The flag is /Coming down. (Barua, Bhaben 251)

But, again, Nirmalprabha assumes an optimistic posture in some of her nature lyrics. 'Etia Sakolo Atir' (All bygone now) is a specimen of this category. Here she makes an effort at improving her present condition. She can 'walk, hear and wave her hands in darkness' to have the warm touch of someone. While her hope is totally shattered, she makes another attempt at reviving it:



I walk in darkness  
 I hear in darkness  
 I wave hands in darkness  
 With a hope of someone  
 To embrace. (translation mine)

It is possible to hear an echo here from Nalinibala Devi who also expresses her tender emotion on darkness that culminates in a mysterious desire to have communion with the Absolute. The poem 'Endhar' (Darkness), illustrates this quite skillfully in the following lines:

O Darkness, embrace me tenderly  
 O Darkness, envelope me with thy mysterious veil.  
 My endless quest will be ended in thee;  
 In thee, I will face the full vision of Him. (Barua, B K 31)

Like Nature, love is also a striking aspect of her poetry. As a modern poet with romantic sensibility, Nirmalprabha emphasizes both types of love, physical and spiritual. Her attitude to love can seemingly be compared to that of John Donne. Donne as a metaphysical poet celebrates both sensuous and spiritual love. He does not completely reject the pleasure of the body even in poems where love is treated as the highest spiritual passion. Hence he is considered to be a poet both of the Petrarchan and Platonic schools. Donne believes that love, merely of the body, is not love but lust. But it cannot be of soul entirely either. Hence love must partake of both the soul and body. Like Donne, Nirmalprabha too thinks that it is the body which brings the two souls together. According to the poet, for the genuine love in the intrinsic sense it needs two souls as well as two bodies. Nirmalprabha as a poet of love longs mainly for the spiritual. To this end her love lyrics seem to be the songs of a secluded bird. In 'Pratichabi' (In Reflections), one of her best known love-lyrics written in impressionistic technique, she endorses the setback of her emotion (love!) as a reflection of her present psychological riddle:

Yet I have taken up /The mirror  
 Your sun / My sun  
 It is the same sun  
  
 It is setting  
 Its reflections-  
 Sad/Hard/Trembling  
 Still/Trembling... (Barua, Bhaben 250)

This reflection is the outcome of the hidden anguish of the poet. Her imaginative courtship perhaps brings little solace to her heart; but she is still tormented by the intensity of the 'Sad, Hard and Trembling' reflections of her

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mind. It also reflects the woes of her ephemeral connubial life. Nirmalprabha, like Robert Browning, has dealt with love in all its multitudinous complexities; depicting a wide spectrum of love situations. Sometimes she speaks of love through imagined perceptions deceiving readers to accept it as her first hand experience. Sometimes, she deals with the tragedy of love, the frustrated and unfulfilled love with equal insight and penetration. Her longing for an environment for lovers in 'Prem Aparup Prem' (Love, Beautiful love) too is a case in point:

It needs  
A little sky  
For a couple of birds  
Together to fly. (translation mine)

In one of her oft-quoted poems, 'Morom' (Love) she defines love realistically:

Love /Is a game  
of expression!  
  
Do not say/You are in love  
How would you/Exhibit it. (translation mine)

The poet stresses only on perceptive gestures of love. For her, love is to be found in the heart not in the brain. If one cannot feel another faculty, love doesn't sustain in the true sense. The aesthetic sense of love, according to her, penetrates the spiritual aspect of human bonding. This is rendered in a splendid manner in one of her love lyrics- Prem Enekuaye (Love is like this):

I am falling /With an open heart  
You don't see  
  
Here itself /My soul sings/You don't hear  
O' I am getting merged  
In the profundity of your heart  
  
You don't chase me! (translation mine)

The bulk of Nirmalprabha's poems on the theme of love in all its varied aspects and moods underlines the kind of emphasis she lays on the subject. Looking at it from a philosophical perspective, she is convinced of the great importance of love. As such, her poems tend to glorify love through a process that transforms it from the physical to the spiritual. She has never tried to refute the significance of human passions. But she is equally anxious to transform it into divinity. Poems like 'Sangya Premar' (Definition of Love), Thunuka Katha (Fragile Words), 'Premar Sangya, Gopan' (Secret) reveal her effort to lend the same credence to body and soul although she often looks for the victory of mind over matter. There is clear

evidence of the corporeal love in 'Sangya Premar' (Definition of Love) where two prominent symbols- sky and flower- have been used to indicate man and woman respectively. Here she tries to make a splendid delineation of physical desire through natural images such as sky and flower which evoke a human condition indicating their sexual love:

Perhaps then enters the large blue sky  
On the budding flower, collapses to the root  
The thunder enters proudly inside the vortex  
Turns into ash  
The abode houses of  
Thigh, breast, body...

(trans. Acharjya, Pradip)

The moment of love making to fulfill their physical contentment brings the end of their bodies and these turn into 'ashes' at the thrill of their intense emotion. At a mystical level the physical union can also be anticipated as a dignified form of motherly love. The poem clearly reveals the affinity with W B Yeats' "Leda and the Swan" which draws upon the physical union between God and man, the outcome of which anticipates the destruction of the province of Troy:

A Shudder in the loins  
Engendered there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi is more a poet of love than of death. She articulates her optimistic philosophy of life; yet death has very often been professed as her recurring theme. Her subjects are few and are constantly repeated: life, death, frustration, love, loneliness- but these are presented with a sense of completeness and thoroughness. Nearly half the bulk of her poetry is concerned with the theme of life, pain and suffering. But her preoccupation with these subject matters is based on religious and spiritual values engendered through her childhood contact with the 'Gita.' Nirmalprabha thus avidly sustains a spiritual relationship with Nature. The poet in her excels in this respect, in using the natural images with symbolical significance. A spiritually inclined poet, she tends to realize herself in a world of sight and smell and taste and touch:

On this bank/of the words  
Is a world/Variegated through  
Sight and taste./Smell and touch.

On that bank/Of the words  
Is a realization  
There I discover myself

(Barua, Bhaben 251)

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Oh where?

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Nirmalprabha is a conscious painter of life. In her eyes there is no bigger poetry than life. To her life is itself an endless poem, a long poem which reflects all human conditions and states of mind. She deems poetry to be a medium of expression of her inner feelings that emerge from her idiosyncratic notions of both states- private and public. However, Nirmalprabha can universalize her feelings through a dexterous presentation of symbols and images. In one of her outstanding poems 'Goponiya' (Secret), the poet strives to catch a glimpse of a few of the reflections of life in the river water:

Does/ the River/Dry out ever?

No/ the River/Dries out never.

Rather/ It gets flooded over  
In every *Bobag*

With the everlasting/Whisper of soul  
For the whole year (translation mine)

Her social consciousness is her hall-mark. She keeps her identity above all political prejudices and material considerations. In some of her poems on life, she expresses her deep concern with the eroding social values emerging from the decline in religious faith and spiritual sentiment. Like Eliot, Nirmalprabha too believes in 'piety towards the dead and concern for the future.' Here we cannot but mention the names of two of her highly celebrated poems- 'Korunatam' (Sorrow) and 'Mormantik' (Heartrending). In 'Karunatam' (Sorrow), she quizzes:

As the smell of the autumn field  
Somehow reaches my nose  
I get my father back

In the aroma  
Of an unfolded *gamacha* of a shop  
I get my mother back

Where shall I leave myself  
For my children  
Oh where? (trans. Thakuria, Niren)

Nirmalprabha accepts that death comes to everyone sooner or later. For her, life is greater than death. Hence, before dying, she wants to live life to the full. Her spiritual quest for life thus proves to be imperative in a process of transforming her complex experience in society to an object of art. In 'Aparajita' (Unvanquished), for instance, she avows her spiritual quest for life and also never hesitates to acknowledge death as a premonition:

I shall die tomorrow  
 Let me remain alive today  
 O my swift-flowing sorrow  
 Keep flowing  
 Through the narrow-created forest  
 I am not weary. (trans. Dutta, B N)

Like a true spiritualist Nirmalprabha takes death as a road to eternity. She concedes death as journey to the grave. This journey, however, is a spiritual one. The dead never come back. The body loses all physical existence forever. The poet gains a vision of this sequence only to cherish life. This idea of Nirmalprabha reminds us of the famous lines of Emily Dickinson in her oft-quoted poem, 'Because I Could not Stop for Death':

We passed the Fields of Grazing Grain-  
 We passed the setting sun -  
 Or rather -He passed us-

However Nirmalprabha Bordoloi bemoans the parting not only of an individual, but of a life process - might even be of a social system which proves her social commitment too. In her famous poem, 'Mormantic' (Heartrending) though she does not speak directly about a situation where death implies a 'journey to the grave', the following lines explicitly indicate an apprehension of something missed or lost prematurely:

I saw him going/away at the time / When the sun was/Declining  
 He was going by/ the curving alley / of the paddy fields.  
 Following him/ went away / the golden sunshine/ of the month/ of 'Aghon'  
 He was going/ and / is gone.  
 Who knows/whether he will/ return or/ not in this birth. (Barua, Ajit 53)

Nirmalprabha Bordoloi contemplates the spiritual essence of natural objects as a substitute to human feeling. She never falters to 'dive deep into the aroma of the soil' and 'become tree with trees, river with rivers'. Further she reckons nature as the symbol or medium of creative expression through which her creative efforts reach the height of psychoanalytical exuberance. Her spiritual piety seen throughout her cognitive creations leads one to search for and discover meaning in life, a meaning that goes beyond a material experience, however successful. This is a deeply personal search, which can bring a person to inner peace even in adverse circumstances. Her spirituality, deeply embedded as it is, in the rich Indian spiritual legacy, it offers a sense of connection to life, to nature and to others that go beyond the physical limits of one's own biological mortality.

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## VOICES FROM THE NORTH-EAST

Prabalika Sarma

**ABSTRACT:** *The North-East of India with its lush green forests and the beautiful valleys offers a mosaic of different races, cultures and sub-cultures. But over the years it has, sadly enough, acquired the notoriety of being a hotbed of insurgent activities and has come to be regarded as a politically disturbed area with instances of frequent violence, ethnic clashes and identity issues. In addition, the negligence and indifference from the mainland has unleashed a feeling of insecurity in the region. There is also the misunderstanding caused by the negotiations between the Indian Government and the insurgents. It is natural, therefore, that after decades of violence the writers from the region should express the fear and terror they have endured, the loss they have incurred, the anger and pain they have undergone, through their writings. All the same, they cherish in their hearts, hopes for a better future when the old peace and serenity would come back and where violence would be a thing of the past. Yet, it would be wrong to suggest that the literature of the region is confined to the depiction of violence, political upheaval and identity related matters only. For, the writers of this part of the country have also endeavoured to capture in their writings the beauty of the landscape, the fascinating myths and the folklore of the region. A few have even remained stoically unaffected by the times. Against this backdrop, this paper makes an attempt at analyzing the writings of a few of the prominent writers from this region. The choice of writers of course is based on a perception of certain important issues portrayed in their writings. It is not a preconceived design that they all happen to be women.*

**Keywords:** *northeast, violence, identity, Tensula Ao, Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire Inah, Arupa Patangia Kalit Jahnabi Barua, region, Nagaland, Arunachal, Asamese*

The 'North-East' as Ngangom and Kynpham suggest is, "a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogenous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred people with a common history." (Ngangom, 2009: ix).

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But the kind of homogeneity of the 'province' referred to seems to have been unfortunately jeopardized by incessant insurgent activities, violence, ethnic clashes and socio-political upheavals of all kinds. In fact, despite the bounty of nature and the rich cultural heritage it seems to be blessed with, the region has come to be characterised by a lurking sense of insecurity and distrust caused both by militancy and the callous apathy and disregard of the powers that be in dealing with such militancy. As Sanjoy Hazarika puts it:

"India's Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometres wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken's Neck. The region has been the battleground for generations of subnational identities confronting insensitive nation states and their bureaucracies as well as of internecine strife. It is a battle that continues, of ideas and arms, new concepts and old traditions, of power, bitterness and compassion." (Hazarika, 1994: xvi).

Consequently, the sufferings, the bitterness, the anger, and the pain of shattered dreams all come to influence the writings of the region. Tilottoma Misra argues quite succinctly:

"Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt 'to live with it', as they are expected to do by the distant centres of power." (Misra, 2011: xix)

Yet it would, indeed, be a travesty of fact to suggest that it is only in the delineation of such insensitive and disturbing aspects of violence and strife that the literature of the region finds its expression. For, the beauty of the landscape, the affluent cultural lore, fascinating myth, intriguing folklore and exciting legends all combine to exemplify the writings of the region. A section of the writers, again have even chosen to follow their individual bent of mind, unaffected by the development of the times. It is against this background that I venture an attempt here to explore the writings of a few of the eminent writers from this region basing the choice of such writers on my perception of certain key issues crucial to the understanding of the region.

As one of the frontrunners amongst the voices of the Northeast, Temsula Ao is very significant with her phenomenal entry into the bandwagon of Indian writers in English. Born in 1945, in the Jorhat district of Assam, she was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota during 1985-86 and received the Padma Shree in 2007 from the government of India and the Governor's Gold Medal in 2009. She retired as Professor, Department of English, and was also the former Dean, School of Humanities and Education, NEHU, and now resides in Lingrijan, Dimapur, Nagaland. She is of the opinion that writers from this region belong to the broader category of Indian writing and resents any segregation from the whole. She has published four books of poetry and two collections of short stories.



More than half a century of bloodshed has marked the history of the Naga people who live in the troubled Northeastern region of India. Her publication *'These Hills called Home' (The Stories from a war zone)*, shows the Naga struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity. It describes how the Naga people cope with violence, how they negotiate power and force and seek and find spaces and enjoyment in the midst of terror. She details a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war and resorts to a process of questioning, revaluing and readapting a new set of values in this emerging Naga society. She thus quotes:

*"I hear the land cry  
Over and over again  
Let all the dead awaken  
And teach the living  
How not to die"*

The two world wars and the recent disturbances have had their impact on the Nagas and Temsula Ao's *These Hills called Homes*. (The stories from the warzone), show how the gradual control of the extremists and insurgents over the Naga National Council and the Nagaland administration, has led to social, political and economic unrest in the area.

In 'The Jungle Major', 'Soaba', 'The Last Song', 'The Curfew Man', 'An old Man remembers', Temsula Ao, gives a vivid account of the disturbances in Nagaland. In 'The Jungle Major', she shows how the subject of independence became a public talk; young people spoke of the exploits of their peers in encounters with the government forces and were eager to join the new band of 'patriotic' warriors to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' rule. The oppressive measures adopted by the army to quell the rebellion backfired and the villages became more sympathetic towards the underground forces, when they heard of the atrocities committed by the armed forces on innocent villagers.

In 'Soaba', Temsula Ao speaks about the new breed who takes up arms; they become the disquieting elements in the power struggle between the two warring groups. Created by the government they are designated as "Home Guards", reputed to be the perpetrator of several heinous crimes. This band, equipped with vehicles and guns, is provided with free ration from rum to boots. They move around town harassing the public at will, after settling old scores with rivals whom they would not have dared to challenge under normal circumstances.

In 'The Last Song', Temsula Ao, speaks about 'the government forces determined to 'teach', all those villagers the consequences of 'supporting' the rebel cause. Even the house of God could not save them from the atrocities of the army.

In the 'Curfew Man', she speaks about the innocent villagers who had to bear the brunt of the martyr restrictions inflicted on their lives as the night curfew was imposed. There were several incidents where civilians were shot dead by the patrol or killed in fake 'encounters' with the army. There were the people, again,

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who co-operated with both the government forces and the so called 'freedom fighter', some by choice and some under compulsion.

In 'Shadows', Temsula Ao, talks about the soldiers of the underground Naga army, who travel through the jungle guided by a relay band of 'scouts' to learn everything about guerrilla warfare and use of sophisticated weaponry while they were in the designated training camp. Only those men who had displayed extraordinary courage in encounters with the Indian Army were considered suitable. There was also the group of jungle rogues who had been terrorizing innocent villagers on both sides of the international border, looting, extorting money and causing general mayhem whenever they got a chance.

In 'An Old Man remembers', Temsula Ao speaks of ..... 'a whole generation of people like old man Sashi, Imli and all their friends and relatives, the prime of their youth was a seemingly endless cycle of beatings, rapes, burning of villages and running from one hideout to another in the deep jungles to escape the pursuing soldiers, turned young boys into men who survived to fight these forces, many losing their lives in the process and many becoming ruthless killers themselves. He (the old man) resolved to tell his grandson how his generation had lost their youth to the dream of nationhood and how that period of history was written with the blood and tears of countless innocents. Their dream to escape and go back to their families kept them going only to be shattered.'

The author details a way of life under threat from the forces of modernization and war. The jungle operations, the raiding of camps of the underground, patrolling of the security forces, the searching of villages, aerial action and arrests—give a vivid and realistic account of poignant and bewildering experiences of people caught in a spiral of violence, under the Indian Government, before Nagaland was declared an independent region. The snipping and ambushing of the underground Naga movement, the imposition of fines, the kidnapping and recruiting and their sabotage activities, show how the Naga issue, speak movingly of home, country, nation, nationality and identity, for making a better life for themselves and posterity.

We can thus say that her *These Hills called Home (The Stories from a war zone)*, is a collection of short stories with an unusual impact on its readers. This impact becomes emotional and the readers are immediately transferred to the terrible world of violence and death. As a story teller she is very effective and manages to hold the attention of her readers till the end.

*Laburnum for My Head*, her second collection of stories, is mythical and witty and tinted with a deep-seated irony. We get a glimpse of her subtle humour in the stories. She writes,

*Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard—stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are at times, confessions. Because stories live in every heart, some get told, like the ones on these pages.....'*

The collection starts with the interesting story of Letina obsessed about having laburnum trees in her garden. When she fails she becomes more desperate and confides in her trusted driver that it is her last wish that the laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown and even selects a spot for her cemetery.

At the end her wish was granted, in a strange manner though. Hence after her death it was reported that,

*'Every May, something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town-a laburnum tree, with buttery blossoms, flowers over the spot'. (Ao, 2009: 1).*

*The Death of a Hunter* is the story of Imchanok, actually a teacher in the village lower primary school but more popular as a skilled hunter. After killing a vicious boar that destroyed the best variety of rice paddies he falls ill recovering only after he offers it a tuft of his hair to remove the curse of his illness. *Three Women* is another interesting story in the collection which is about a letter that changes the life of the three women- Martha (daughter), Medemla (mother) and Lipoktula (grandmother). These are some of the mysterious and strange stories in the collection. Her language is simple and lucid with some really thought provoking expressions. For instance, a mother's advice to her daughter so beautifully framed,

*You know, it is wise for a woman to keep a part of the self all to herself and sometimes she has to choose between telling the truth which destroys, and living with a lie which remain a secret forever. I cannot say anything more because it is only you who make the choice. (Ao, 2009: 75).*

Though more popular for her short stories, Temsula Ao was first a poet. Citing a few of her poems to sample her poetry such as *Blood of Others*, where she pines over the loss of the ancient tribal ways with the invasion of outsiders and spread of Christianity which discarded the pagan tribal traditions,

*Discarding our ancient practice  
Of etching on wood and stone  
And learned instead to scratch on paper  
In premature tryst with the magic Script.*

Then there is the poignant description of the disillusionment with the new generation in her poem, 'The old story teller',

*'I have lived my life believing storytelling was my proud legacy'. But,  
'My own grandsons dismiss  
Our stories as ancient gibberish'.*

She refers to ancient Naga rituals as in 'The Spear',

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On the whole she is an amazing writer. And the excellence of her art just proves how truly deserving she is of the Padmashree, which was conferred on her by the government of India in recognition of her outstanding contribution to literature.

From Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh, we have the multi-talented Mamang Dai, a poet, historian, short story writer, journalist as well as a novelist. She resigned from the Indian Administrative Service to become an author. She was awarded the State Verrier Elwin award in 2003 and the Padmashree in 2011. General Secretary of Arunachal Literary Society and member of North East Writer's Forum and member of National Sahitya and Sahitya Natak Academy, her first book, *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* documented the customs and the culture of a land not known to many. It reveals the rich culture, tradition and rituals of Arunachal Pradesh. But it was her first book of poems, *The River Poems*, (2004), which marked her out as major emerging voice from the northeast. In the poem, 'Small towns and the river', referring to her native town she says,

*Small towns always remind me of death  
My hometown lies calmly amidst the trees,  
It is always the same.  
With the dust flying,*

Or referring to the danger lurking in the jungle she says in 'Remembrance',

*The jungle is a big eater  
Hiding terror in carnivorous green,*

Or in 'Gone',

*The steep hillside is a hard place  
There is nowhere to rest our feet  
Even when I want to kneel and pray,  
Moved to tears by a rainbow sky*

We get a glimpse of her romantic spirit in the following lines from 'Rain'

*In the soul of the rain, is contained all the spirit of the jungle*

In all her poems we find the images of the rain, river, hills, mountains that are so characteristic of the landscape of Arunachal Pradesh.

Next came her two novels, *The Legends of Pensam*, (2006), and *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and a couple of stories for children with *Katha*, viz., 'The Sky Queen' (2005) and 'Once upon a Moontime' (2005). In her opinion, the northeast is not a homogeneous entity but there is a geographical continuity and a shared culture and a relationship. *The Legends of Pensam* is a secret garden where no rules are followed and where one can do whatever one wants. Mamang Dai recreates fantastic tales using the oral traditions of Arunachal Pradesh in English. Being interested in the traditions of her land which were destroyed by the growing

importance of modern culture and tradition she started recording them. She personally met people and collected and recorded these narratives. It was a sort of cultural translation of her local folktales into English. She finds mythology and folk tales fascinating. She went to the villages, met the old people and talked to them. From them she procured the small histories, which were getting lost. In one of her poems 'Tapu' she reveals a dance performed by male members of the Adi community, during the annual practice of fencing. The dance is a rite in exorcism to drive away the Spirit of Fear. Sometimes, women would also don the warriors' garb to join in the dance. It is believed that such an act would bless the women with a son.

There are references in her writings to the life of the tribal people. Hunting, for instance, was a popular sport. In fact, most of the tales in this collection show that men always went hunting. In the very first tale of *The Legends of Pensam*, 'A diary of the world', there are interesting references to the myths and mysteries of Arunachal Pradesh. Pinyar states, 'Every year at least three men die in hunting accidents in our parts'. The reader's interest is further aroused by Mona's question, 'Are all deaths accidents?' (Dai, 2006: 28). The story of the *miti-mili* race and their preparation of *si-ye*, how it was forbidden before a hunt or journey as it brought the men under hallucination and how when they fail to observe the rules men die in the forest. The ritual of sprinkling *si-ye* on the eyelids of those who die an unnatural death, so that their spirit will not return on some restless search has undertones of the enchanting world. In *Small Histories recalled in the season of rain*, the tales of the making of the famous Stillwell road that wound through Asia like a serpent, meandering more than a thousand miles across three countries going up mountains, plunged into gorges and spanned ten rivers and hundreds of streams. The construction of the road is believed to have killed so many men that it is called 'A man- a mile road'. The tales are really enchanting while the legends constitute the history of a tribe. While the reader reacts to the stories of Temsula Ao in stunned silence and an uncanny fear, the stories of Mamang Dai take the reader to a mystic world of the past. There is timelessness in the experience, soothing and intoxicating. In other words, whereas Ao's tales are really gripping, Dai's have a snoozing effect of moving away from the time zone to the world of fantasy. If one journey is real the other is an *Alice in Wonderland* type of experience. The revelations of the one are intensely shocking while those of the other are disturbingly strange.

Mamang Dai's *Stupid Cupid* is an altogether different literary exercise from *The Legends of Pensam*. Drawn to New Delhi from the hills of the North-East by hopes of adventure and the love of a married man, Adna opens a guest house for lovers and friends. She felt that New Delhi is 'a decent meeting place where men and women, lovers and friends could rendezvous without too much sweat.' (Dai, 2009: 1). In a small bungalow on a quiet lane, an unlikely assortment of couples and singles come together, for an afternoon, a day and sometimes for months. While in the big city death, like Cupid, stalks the streets and strikes at random. The seemingly light hearted title raises several serious issues. It is novel of relationships with their complications and happiness. Issues like the essentials of a good

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marriage; marriage is not everything, conversion of love to business in the *Four Seasons*, are raised in the novel. 'There was an exodus from our parts to Delhi', (Dai, 2009: 13). This refers to the large number of students that flock to Delhi to study, for career and other opportunities. It was like an escape from home where they 'called it a day by six in the evening'. For Mareb the 'nights in the city were a rest from the sleepless vigil of the hills where so much was on edge and so much tense and unfinished'. The death of Amine brings to light the fact that she had ignored the real Delhi where men could do evil as they performed their daily activities, quite casually.

Easterine Kire Iralu is yet another significant writer from Nagaland who has written several books including three collections of poetry and short stories. Her first novel happens to be *A Naga Village Remembered*. She has translated 200 oral poems from her native language, Tenyidie, into English. Her next publication *Mari* is an interesting novel about the life and experiences of the girl named Mari. At the beginning of the novel she quotes:

*When you go home  
Tell them of us  
And say for your tomorrow  
We gave our today*

(Inscription on the war memorial of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division at the Kohima War Cemetery)

It relates to the impact of the Japanese invasion of India on the simple folks of Kohima. Her description of Nature before the invasion is:

*Flowers grew wild all over town because there were such few houses. Here and there were flowering trees like the pink bohemia and the scarlet flame of the forest. The town certainly looked colourful with the trees and flowers all around.*  
(Mari, 2010: 10)

But after the invasion she writes:

*The front yard which used to be filled with flowers, was unrecognizable. Large craters had been left by the shell and there were lot of ammunition near the house, from different-sized mortar shells to glittering rifle shots.*  
(Mari, 2010: 94)

Other books include *Forest Song*, a volume of spirit stories and *Bitter Wormwood*, a novel on the Indo-Naga conflict. Her "A Terrible Matriarchy", is the tale of a girl growing up in a strict traditional society, in a conflict-ridden area, but who refuses to be defeated easily. She released *Once in a faraway Dorga*, a children's book which revolves round the lives of Dorgels, the citizens of a fictional world and *Life on hold*, on the second day of the Hornbill Festival 2012

,at the Bamboo pavilion, Heritage Village. Her *Kisama* is a novella, set in Nagaland during the troubled times of independence with the central characters representing the people who were affected by Naga Nationalism.

'The Man who lost his spirit', featured in Tilottoma Misra's *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India-Fiction* is an adaptation from a folk belief that people's spirits can be left behind if they go into spirit infested areas in the deep forests. However, it is used here in the story to confront and grapple with our fears, ending happily, of course. It begins interestingly:

*There was once a man who climbed up a great tree in the forest. When he climbed down, his spirit was left behind up the great tree. He was so sick for three days.*

Then again,

*'That is not a place that you go to alone. It is dangerous. Didn't he know that?'*

A solution is offered by the village elders to the problem.

*'He has left his spirit behind. You must go and call it back as soon as you can. Do this as soon as it is light. Remember to call it home as though you don't know the way. Let it lead the way.'* (Misra, 2011: 255).

Easterine Kire Iralu co-authored her first volume of poems *Kelboukevira* in English, which mourns for the Naga warriors killed in the Indo-Naga conflict in the 1950s. One of her poems which also featured in Tilottoma Misra's *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India – Poetry & Essays, Genesis*, begins in a classic way.

*Keivelie speaks of a time  
When her hills were untamed  
Her soil young and virgin  
And her warriors, worthy  
The earth had felt good  
And full and rich and kind to his touch.*

(Misra, 2011:81).

Her *A Naga Village Remembered* is an account of the lost battle between the colonial forces of Britain and the little village of Khonoma. Growing up in Kohima in the 1960s she very closely experienced the conflict that took place near the Naga village. Easterine Iralu has been persistent in sensitizing the world about the real situation back home. The love for her native land and culture colour her writings with nostalgia for the golden days. She expresses a strong political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity; questions the violence that has dismantled homes due to the plague called insurgency. In a recent biographical note, she writes about her experience of growing up in Nagaland: "Curfews and continued periods of gunfire were all a part of growing up in

Nagaland". (Easterine  
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Nagaland". (Easterine Iralu in ICORN, Autumn 2006). But the conflict became worse with the emergence of infighting in the eighties. In 1987, the cycle of killing and counter revenge went on unrestricted. Two levels of violence existed. On one hand, the atrocities of the Indian army continued and on the other the infighting due to ideological differences between the Naga freedom fighters. She had lived in a house that was stalked by armed men at night because of the political writings of her husband. The pain she went through when her son was kidnapped. Phones being tapped, every movement of the family was closely watched. She used to keep a double barrel gun for the security of her family. Finally she escaped from the brutality of the life in Nagaland where children were traumatized and took refuge in Tromsa, N Norway in 2005. Away from a city where it was normal to hear gunshots in the night, be in constant fear of death. She felt the price of peace for the years of conflict, was too high for the people to pay. She never stopped thinking about her people. The bitterness of the past should not shadow the life of the new generation for they deserve a better life. She feels that *The North-East Writers Forum* is a milestone in the Indian literary world showing that there was much more to the North-East than political literature. In fact, she has written stories and poems based on native traditions and the natural beauty of the region.

Away from home she continued writing about her native state. She felt a personal need to write about the conflict in her homeland for deep in her heart she hopes to influence change through her writings. Her native state Nagaland has a history of insurgency and independence movements. "The sudden displacement of the young from a placid existence in rural habitats to a world of conflict and confusion in urban settlements is also the fallout of recent Naga history and one that has left them disabled in more ways than one". (Ao, 2006: x). She feels that this history of violence should end at some point. In fact, she felt the need for her personal catharsis before she could go on to write for other people. She seriously feels that the time has come to address the silences that had occurred because of the conflict. Peace has to be restored in the region for the good old days to come back. She uses her writing, and her public position to inform the Nagas and the rest of the world about the conflict of the region.

Any discussion on contemporary writers of North-East will be incomplete without Arupa Patangia Kalita (b. 1956) a powerful writer in Assamese, whose novels and short stories have been translated into English, Hindi and Bengali. In fact she has been honoured with the Sahitya Setu Purashkar of West Bengal (1993) and the Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad Award to name a few, for her outstanding contribution to contemporary Assamese literature. A forceful writer, her *Ayananta* (Dawn, 1994) and *Phelani* (2003) created ripples in the literary world.

*Ayananta*, is about a young girl named Binapani, who comes from a small Assamese town and displays great courage and intelligence, fighting against the social injustice she sees around her. There are other characters like Jasoda, Tagor, Jeuti to name a few who play a similar role. The portrayal of her characters is very realistic as she picks them up from real life colouring them with her imagination. She touches on the age old issue of gender discrimination and sufferings of women,



but remains a neutral narrator. Moreover her narrative style is such that it holds the reader's attention who does not feel like sparing the reading of the book.

*Phelani*, is another major novel of Arupa Patangia Kalita which has been published in English by Zubaan. The protagonist is very symbolically named Phelani, meaning thrown away or wastage. Born in the wild, uncared and ignored she grows in the midst of nature playing in the wild fields of Assam. The grass or reeds is symbolic of women who have been neglected for centuries yet they continue to strive and survive. *Phelani* is the history of the grandmother Ratnamala, mother Jutimala and granddaughter Phelani our protagonist - three women one a Bodo, one a Bengali and one an Assamese. This is an illustration of the kind of multiculturalism prevalent in Assamese society. It is the deliberate design of the novelist to drive home the point that *Phelani* is the story of human beings who have suffered. There is a beautiful question on the problem of division which is significant to the main theme beautifully described. *Phelani* covers that period of Assam history from 1983 to 1998. Insurgency has changed the landscape of Assamese literature. She touches upon the plight of women during that turbulent period. But she is concerned about women from among the oppressed and the downtrodden. There are eighteen women in all. Men are a curse in their lives who either drink or beat their wives or are criminals. All the women have to work for a living. Yet they survive on mutual support.

In *Arunimar Swadesh* she deals with the issue of secret killings that took place in the late nineties when the relatives of insurgents were targeted and many families were wiped out. This insensitive policy adopted by the government affected the people very much.

There were several other works of fiction authored by her like *Mriganaabhi*, *Maple Habir Rang*, *Morujatra aru Ayanaanta*, *Morubhumit Menakaa Aru Ayanaanta*, *Deopasar Bhagnastapat*, *Kaaiantat Keteki*, *Pais Sotualar Kathakataa*, and *Milleniumar Sapon*.

It would be wrong to say that she only writes about contemporary Assam. She has also written stories like *Kanya Jaya Matri*, *Morubhumit Menakaa* concerned with human relations relevant to any part in India and not necessarily to any particular region. She has been widely acclaimed and her original and unique themes cut across the boundaries of her native state.

Her *Morubhumit Menakaa* is a powerful story of the silently suffering women. It is indeed a gripping story with an admirable originality where the plot with its admixture of the ancient and modern is particularly striking. The kind of terror and tension of those turbulent years of the Assam agitation that Arupa Patangia Kalita had to endure influence her novels and short stories in a pronounced way. Her short story "Aai" (Mother), where she depicts the sufferings of a mother who after losing her husband in a blast loses her sons one by one, for instance, is a weighty illustration. The sons who turn to insurgency are all killed by the army while the mother loses her mental balance. With each loss she withdraws from the real world, but, significantly enough, she retains in her mind, her identity of a mother. She waits for her son everyday and takes care to cook his rice. Otherwise,

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*A flock of parn the streets; they*

she is almost a child, and if not interrupted, she would continue with the same task unabatedly. At the end, it really becomes unbearable to watch her when she comes face to face with her son's dead body.

As a writer, her style is quite simple and lucid. Her descriptions of nature too are remarkable. For example, the opening chapter of *Pbelani* delineates some extremely beautiful pictures of nature. In spite of her focus on the sad realities of life she does not fail to observe the beauty of nature around her. Arupa is, undoubtedly, one of the most powerful writers of contemporary Assam.

Finally, we have the young award winning writer from Assam, Jahnavi Barua. Unlike the other writers presented in this paper, she is a doctor by profession settled in Bangalore. Though she had been writing from a young age; she became a full time writer only from 2004. She first wrote short stories for various anthologies. *The boy who lost his voice* is a children's book she had written earlier. She was awarded a Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship for creative writing by the British Council in 2006. Her *Next Door*, which was published in 2008, is a collection of short stories based on Assam. In, "The Magic Spell" from *Next Door* she relates a simple story of a young couple with a five year old daughter. The incident about the swallowing of wild seeds called *latumoni* makes the parents realise that for a while they had drifted apart. The child's action manages to bring them together again. The activities of the child are beautifully described.

*Jitu settles down on the thick leaf litter under the creeper and sets to her task. She takes a pod and strips the seeds from it; she smiles as she sees the pretty scarlet seeds in her palm. They nestle there glistening like little glass beads. The seeds are beautiful: they are red and smooth and shiny and have a little black eye at one end. Magic seeds. That's what Minoti, Mala's maid, said they were.*

(Barua, 2008: 8)

Her love for nature is displayed in her descriptions in "Honeybees" another story from the same collection.

*The foamy streams of water slithered forth like a many-headed snake, engulfing everything in sight. It was well-named, The river, he thought bitterly: Pagladiya, The Crazy River. Now in the winter the river was appealing; it meandered sensuously, silver-blue waters shimmering in the morning sun. Turquoise kingfishers sat a patient solitude on the trees that lined the banks and every now and then darted out of the foliage and dove into the waters in search of fish.*

(Barua, 2008: 49, 50)

And from *Rebirth*,

*A flock of parrots have settled in the clump of peacock flower trees in the park across the street; they are a raucous lot and their screeching and frisky play makes me smile.*

(Barua, 2010:10)

*But even the silence was wild: it was a taut silence held up by the muted swishing of the trees in the wind, by the whirrings of untamed insects in the distance. (Barua, 2010:38)*

Her stories are based on her native state. In her novel, again, she moves from Bangalore to Guwahati and Guwahati to Bangalore. There are frequent references not only to the land, the rivers, flowers, birds but also to the customs and traditions of her land. In *Next Door*, for instance, she writes:

*That was when she began to teach Makon, Anupam's sister the rudiments of weaving. Makon a confident ten-year-old, learnt quickly, and very soon she was able to weave a gamosa by herself.*

(Barua, 2008: 51),

Jahnavi Barua is a fine artist and her language too is really powerful. For example,

*My days and nights, dreams and real life, are woven together in a delicate pattern; without fail the first few moments of waking up set the tone for the day that follows.*

(Barua, 2010:32)

Her one liners are particularly impressive. For instance,

*No one talks; we are imprisoned in our thoughts. (Barua, 2010: 58)*

*Stone felt so much more permanent. (Barua, 2010: 49)*

*I am alone in my soporific state. (Barua, 2010: 57)*

Unlike the other writers from the region Jahnavi never presents the disturbances of the region too bluntly. On the surface, she seems almost unconcerned. All the same, she cannot afford to ignore the continuing disturbances and turmoil. Consequently, there are stories in the *Next Door* dealing with the impact of on the upcoming generation.

*Madan looked uncomfortable. 'You Know', he said, 'to join in the fight for the motherland'. He added defiantly, 'There is good money in it, you know'. Anupam looked thoughtful, 'I don't deny that.' And it is a just cause too.' Madan's face was creased in thought. "I agree," Anupam said. 'But you are your parents' only son' (Barua,2008: 56)*

Even in her novel she never fails to refer to them.

*A small caption on the right side catches my eye: red alert in Assam as the countdown begins to the raising day of one of the insurgent groups.*

(Barua, 2010:34)

She also deals in *Next door*, which is a gripping tale v

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She also deals with human relationships and the family bond. The last story in *Next door*, which is the title of the collection, is appropriately put at the end. It is a gripping tale which could be true of any part of India.

The endings of her short stories are usually abrupt and leave the reader wondering about the fate of the protagonist. Similarly, the list of the different varieties of birds and flowers she refers to is an unending one. Again, she is quite meticulous and methodical in her details. For example in the latamoni chewing case of "The Magic Spell" referred to earlier she is like a scientist in stating the facts and the symptoms.

The plot of *Rebirth*, for which she was shortlisted for the prestigious The Man Asian literary award for 2011, is very contemporary. The protagonist Kaberi comes from the small city of Guwahati to stay with her affluent husband. She stays in a luxurious flat decorated very tastefully. Kaberi has a good taste too in spite of her simplicity. But she misses the openness of her life back home.

*I would step out of the flat, locking it carefully behind me, and run up the terrace where I was surrounded by the sky (Barua, 2010:1)*

She keeps on referring to the frequent trips to Kaziranga with cousin Joya, and Bina Mahi and Bipul Moha and her parents.

*For the first time in weeks I feel that I will sleep well. I will dream of Joya and Kaziranga, good dreams. I will wake up plump with happiness and tell you about them tomorrow.*

Loving her husband immensely her entire life revolved round him. Unfortunately, they had no children. And he too was of a different temperament. Of course he did cooperate with her – taking her to the doctor for tests. But by that time their relationship had soured and he drifted to another woman. He was on the verge of divorcing her when he learned of her pregnancy. She had things to settle and did not inform him about it. However he learns about it from the doctor's bills. Meanwhile her father expires and she goes to Guwahati. She always nurtured a feeling of rejection from her father. In fact, her parents' married life was not a bed of roses either. Yet her mother continued. Kaveri revolts inwardly against her chauvinistic husband who prides in being able to provide her with all that she fancies. He mocks her that she could not maintain her status without his help. In her revolt against her uncaring husband she keeps him hanging in her decision to stay married to him. The novel ends with her regaining her balance after the years of marriage and ends up confident. She moves from Bangalore to Guwahati. The emptiness of her husband's luxurious apartment in Bangalore becomes a foil for the airy and spacious house built by Mridul on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. Her life is a parallel to her mother's life. From Bangalore to Guwahati her mind keeps on moving, an unfaithful husband, a lonely and insecure life. We are left wondering what decision she takes. This is one writer we should look forward to.

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## LIFTING THE VEIL

*Impact of Recent Writings in English from the North-East of India*

*Jahnavi Barua*

Geographically distant from the rest of the India, connected to its main body only by the precarious chicken's neck, the North-East corner of the country has been a mysterious place, shrouded in an impenetrable mist, for most Indians. Over the years, improved routes of communication – railways, new airlines, mobile phones, the internet, tourism – have succeeded in lifting this veil to a certain extent but still, a vast amount of uncertainty, apprehension and plain ignorance remained. While we no longer had to explain that we were not Chinese – as I have had to as a child in Delhi – we now had to explain why many of us did not look "North-Eastern". Then, an entirely unexpected event took place. From a trickle in the eighties and the nineties, writings in English from the North-East flowed down the hills and through valleys of this region in increasing volumes, coalescing into an unstoppable flood that happily spilled over into the rest of India with interesting effects.

Fiction is not the prescribed method of studying peoples and culture; it cannot replace the traditional methods of teaching and learning, but it certainly is one of the more pleasurable ways of opening our minds to other kinds of people and to their worlds. So many of us have plunged into the fantastic world of Latin America with its exuberant colours, voluptuous fragrances and entirely unexpected people, through the writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende and the poetry of Pablo Neruda. Many more have been awed by the beauty of moonlit nights over snowy steppes as they have been depicted by the Russian master writers. And of course, the winds over bleak Yorkshire moors and their equally grim residents are still vivid in many minds, as are the downs of the fictional Wessex, an area roughly corresponding to today's Devon, Dorchester and Wiltshire. Closer to home, stories translated from Kannada are coloured by the vivid orange of the kanakambaram flower, a blossom much prized in the region, while tales from Tamil Nadu leave us with the lingering tastes of spicy

sambar and rasam. A Punjabi tale brings to mind bright yellow mustard fields while any story from Rajasthan evokes images of sandstone palaces rising up like mirages from the desert sands. Fiction then, is a definite way of enticing readers to step over the threshold of a certain landscape, to explore it and if this journey can be made interesting enough the reader ventures further and further in his quest. What better way to acquaint oneself with an unfamiliar world?

Where the language of a region of the world is not English, translating local fiction is the only way this exchange can be made possible and where good translations are not widely available, then the only bridge between that region and the rest of the world is fiction from the local area written in English. While there are excellent translations of Assamese writings in English, many more are urgently needed to display sufficiently well the entire range of our fiction, poetry and other writings to the world. In the meantime, writers in English from the region are crossing over from its misty valleys and hills to other parts of India and the world, carrying with them tales of these forgotten lands and its people. They are not many in number but the stories they have sent out have impressed and aroused the interest of many who have been indifferent before. In fact, a new term has been coined recently in Indian Writing in English: Writings from North-East India. This term has aroused concern in many, writers and non-writers alike; the worry is that this bringing together of all fiction from the North-East under one umbrella will serve to undermine it, to ghettoize it in a way, and they say that individual writers should be assessed and read as just writers, disregarding their origin entirely. The argument extends to the fact that even the term "North-East India" is an artificial construct. While these concerns may be perfectly valid, there are two things to be remembered.

Firstly, that the writers came before the term. Individual writers in English from the North-East have been writing and publishing and struggling to be published and read for many years before this term became popular towards the end of the year 2009. The North East Writer's Forum (NEWF) has been in existence since 1998 and many, if not all, the writers in English from the region have been associated with it, in some way or the other. Arup Kumar Dutta's fiction, Dhruva Hazarika's "A Bowstring Winter", Mitra Phukan's "The Collector's Wife", Mamang Dai's "Legends of Pensam", Temsula Ao's "These Hills called Home", Siddhartha Deb's novels "The Point of Return" and "Surface", Anjum Hasan's "Lunatic in My Head" and my own collection of short fiction "Next Door", the non-fiction writings of Sanjoy Hazarika, Jaideep Saikia and others were published before this term came into common use. These works were read and loved as individual works of separate writers, not because of a secondary interest in the region their writers came from. It can be argued, in fact, that the impact of this group of writers, among others, led to the generation of interest in publishing, academic and media circles and that led, in turn, to the birth of the term "English Writings from North-East India". Jamia Millia University has now instituted an optional paper in their M.A syllabus termed "English Writings From North-East India"; they have included the novels of Birendra K. Bhattacharya, Easterine Iralu and Anjum Hasan; the poetry of Robin Ngangom, Mamang Dai

and Desmond Lee Zama, Kynpham

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and Desmond Lee Kharmawphang; and the short fiction of Temsula Ao, Margaret Zama, Kynpham Nongkynrih and Jahnavi Barua.

Secondly, that there is little harm in being banded together, for the time being, if that makes us stronger and more visible. For a region that has been invisible for so long, any visibility should be welcome. And there is strength in numbers; the older writers have perhaps paved the way and the baton is now being expertly carried by a new crop of talented writers from the region: Siddhartha Sharma, Aruni Kashyap, Nitoo Das, Mona Zote among others. And just as in American fiction or in Russian fiction and fiction from Africa, writers will eventually be read and remembered, not for the region they are slotted into but for the beauty and impact of their individual writing. And for the different stories they are able to tell. Writers from the North-East by virtue of their geography and history do have a different story to tell from the rest of India – that is what perhaps, has sparked off such an interest in them.

What then, has been the impact of these recent writings from the region? The most immediate and visible impact has been the kindling of a new kind of interest in the region. While many of us from the region, at some point or the other, have served as unofficial tourist guides for friends and strangers from the outside world, this time around a different, more informed curiosity about the place and its people has been generated. Many times, I have been stopped by complete strangers at book readings and book shops, who ask, not only about the geographical places of interest in the region, but about the rest. They seek to know about the people and their ways, about the food they eat and the clothes they wear. They plan to visit the North-East whenever they can and when asked what sparked off this interest, many of them answer that it was a book. They came across Dhruba Hazarika's short stories and wondered at this culture where man and nature seemed to share a rare bond; some read about Shillong in Anjum Hasan's first book and were fascinated by this forgotten hill-station; many read about the feisty protagonist in Mitra Phukan's first novel and were curious about the position of women in this unusual society and many wandered onto the banks of the Brahmaputra in my collection, *Next Door*, and decided to come and take a look for themselves.

An awareness beyond the obvious physical attractions of the region has been excited and this time around, it is not a voyeuristic curiosity for the exotic, but an awareness that there is in that distant corner of the North-East a people who, while being very different in many ways, are also not unlike the rest of the country as far as universal human aspirations, loves, longings and losses are concerned.

In a recent interview with *The Hindu*, the interviewer brought up an interesting question: he noticed that in my writings he found characters "walking the tight rope of desperation and a quiet rebellion." He wondered if that had anything to do with the place I came from. A very acute observation and I answered in the affirmative, saying that in our society, moderation and restraint have always traditionally been strongly emphasized, although things are changing with modern influences. Reflecting on this intelligent and thought-provoking question, I realised that while I had not consciously set out to draw any character as a forbearing,

restrained, calm individual, my own societal conditioning had led me to write them that way. Similarly, the position of women has been commented upon by several readers. The joron ceremony excited much interest when readers realised a girl also received substantial gifts unlike in other communities where the flow was in one direction only. Of course, some also argued that this custom commoditized a girl, but concluded that it was preferable to dowry any day. The matriarchal system of the Khasis; tribal loyalties as vividly described in Temsula Ao's work and the central position of nature are other points that have drawn vigorous interest. In almost every piece of work that has come out of this region, the physical beauty of the landscape has shone through. Readers have noticed this and the strong bond that people share with their land. And of course, the political situation, in particular, the long running insurgency, invites much discussion in all gatherings.

Fiction is not geography or history and certainly not, sociological text, and it should not be written or read that way, but sometimes a novel or a short story can serve to illuminate a place or people in a way that nothing else can. In recent years, it is my belief, that the story-tellers of the North-East have done just that.

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and Desmond Lee Kharmawphang; and the short fiction of Temsula Ao, Margaret Zama, Kynpham Nongkynrih and Jahnvi Barua.

Secondly, that there is little harm in being banded together, for the time being, if that makes us stronger and more visible. For a region that has been invisible for so long, any visibility should be welcome. And there is strength in numbers; the older writers have perhaps paved the way and the baton is now being expertly carried by a new crop of talented writers from the region: Siddhartha Sharma, Aruni Kashyap, Nitoo Das, Mona Zote among others. And just as in American fiction or in Russian fiction and fiction from Africa, writers will eventually be read and remembered, not for the region they are slotted into but for the beauty and impact of their individual writing. And for the different stories they are able to tell. Writers from the North-East by virtue of their geography and history do have a different story to tell from the rest of India – that is what perhaps, has sparked off such an interest in them.

What then, has been the impact of these recent writings from the region? The most immediate and visible impact has been the kindling of a new kind of interest in the region. While many of us from the region, at some point or the other, have served as unofficial tourist guides for friends and strangers from the outside world, this time around a different, more informed curiosity about the place and its people has been generated. Many times, I have been stopped by complete strangers at book readings and book shops, who ask, not only about the geographical places of interest in the region, but about the rest. They seek to know about the people and their ways, about the food they eat and the clothes they wear. They plan to visit the North-East whenever they can and when asked what sparked off this interest, many of them answer that it was a book. They came across Dhruba Hazarika's short stories and wondered at this culture where man and nature seemed to share a rare bond; some read about Shillong in Anjum Hasan's first book and were fascinated by this forgotten hill-station; many read about the feisty protagonist in Mitra Phukan's first novel and were curious about the position of women in this unusual society and many wandered onto the banks of the Brahmaputra in my collection, *Next Door*, and decided to come and take a look for themselves.

An awareness beyond the obvious physical attractions of the region has been excited and this time around, it is not a voyeuristic curiosity for the exotic, but an awareness that there is in that distant corner of the North-East a people who, while being very different in many ways, are also not unlike the rest of the country as far as universal human aspirations, loves, longings and losses are concerned.

In a recent interview with *The Hindu*, the interviewer brought up an interesting question: he noticed that in my writings he found characters "walking the tight rope of desperation and a quiet rebellion." He wondered if that had anything to do with the place I came from. A very acute observation and I answered in the affirmative, saying that in our society, moderation and restraint have always traditionally been strongly emphasized, although things are changing with modern influences. Reflecting on this intelligent and thought-provoking question, I realised that while I had not consciously set out to draw any character as a forbearing,

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restrained, calm individual, my own societal conditioning had led me to write them that way. Similarly, the position of women has been commented upon by several readers. The joron ceremony excited much interest when readers realised a girl also received substantial gifts unlike in other communities where the flow was in one direction only. Of course, some also argued that this custom commoditized a girl, but concluded that it was preferable to dowry any day. The matriarchal system of the Khasis; tribal loyalties as vividly described in Temsula Ao's work and the central position of nature are other points that have drawn vigorous interest. In almost every piece of work that has come out of this region, the physical beauty of the landscape has shone through. Readers have noticed this and the strong bond that people share with their land. And of course, the political situation, in particular, the long running insurgency, invites much discussion in all gatherings.

Fiction is not geography or history and certainly not, sociological text, and it should not be written or read that way, but sometimes a novel or a short story can serve to illuminate a place or people in a way that nothing else can. In recent years, it is my belief, that the story-tellers of the North-East have done just that.

\* \* \* \*

Barman, Kalpi  
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