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Narrating "India": Liminal Narratives of Northeast and Assertion of Identity

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Abstract

The canonical notion of the Nation has always been a highly problematic and significant motif in Indian English literature. A close perusal reveals the staggering conflicts that arise as the counter-narratives raise pertinent questions that dispute the validity of the official discourse. One may argue that it is too simplistic to think of a singular concept of 'India' that can appease the demands of pluralistic narratives. Rather, one should envisage 'Indias' that open itself to fluid perspectives and accommodate polyphonic narratives. It is at such a juncture that writings from the Northeast India play a decisive role as they effectively re-mould the concepts of identity and authenticity in narrating the Indian experience. When writers like Siddhartha Deb, Anjum Hasan, and Anungla Zoe Longkumer examine the nuances of a liminal discourse that had hitherto been excluded from the nationalist canon, they become potent narratives that hint at the palimpsestic layers of a pluralistic discourse. The present paper tries to analyse works like *The Point of Return* (2003), *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) and *The Many that I am* (2019) as narratives that become persuasive layers of a palimpsestic notion of nation.

Keywords: Liminal narratives, fluidity, palimpsestic India, identity and authenticity, Self/Other dichotomy

Introduction: Narrating the Nation

The nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries witnessed the nationalist movement in India making its presence felt in the myriad aspects of quotidian life. The growth of nationalist literature is concomitant with the idea of creating a nationalist discourse that expedited the creation of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1986) which naturally served its purpose in disposing of the colonial yoke. Sunil Khilnani notes how the creation of the political entity called modern India has been fashioned out of diverse ideas. According to him, "the possibility that India could be united into a single political community was the wager of India's modern, educated, urban elite, whose intellectual horizons were extended by modern ideas and whose sphere of action was expanded by modern agencies." (2012, p.5). However, as the literary nation thus narrated began its sojourn after independence, the earlier paradigms that served to define it had to be constantly re-written to accommodate nascent narratives that had remained silenced in an earlier era. The monolith of 'India' has been replaced by plural narratives that celebrate the protean nature of 'Indias'.

"In emphasising the fluidity of boundaries, ... texts have moved a long way from the totalizing narratives of territorial nationalism. The idealism and absolute dichotomies of the early twentieth century cannot sustain a writer who lives in a more ambiguous and tentative world." (Mukherjee, 1992, p.148)

The task of narrating the new ‘Indias’ has been unreservedly taken up by modern Indian English writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Manu Joseph and so on who believe that the personal is the political. In the decades following Indian independence, the sacrosanct ideal of the Indian nation and its official narratives were closely emulated in literature as well. Though there were voices of dissent, they were few and far in between. The dawn of the new century brought forth a class of writers who deliberately foregrounded liminal narratives and their untold perspectives. Narrating the nation is a complex task and narrating the liminal discourses couched within the nationalist narrative is even more intricate. Bhabha acknowledges the complexity of this process when he comments on how it evolves into a “... liminal form of social representation, a space that is internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense cultural locations.” (Bhabha, 1990, p.299).

If one is to observe the narration of a nation like India, there is a surprisingly diverse variety of indigenous cultures jostling with each other for space and voice. “This discordant material was not the stuff of which nation-states are made; it suggested no common identity or basis of unity that could be reconciled within a modern state.” (Khilnani, 2012, p.152). The very notion of a fixed national identity becomes extremely cliched as it trivialises the pertinent signifiers of identity like sexuality or ethnicity or social class that each individual embodies. Huddart opines that “the power of a national narrative seems entirely confident of its consistency and coherence, but is all the while undermined by its inability to really fix the identity of the people, which would be to limit their identity to a single overpowering nationality.” (2007, p. 111)

The post-independence era witnessed a number of counter-narratives that sought to (re)define the ideas of identity and authenticity through potent discourses that sought radical revisions of the official narrative. The official narrative of nationalism clashes violently with the counter-narratives as they both follow different ideological tangents. The discourse of nationalism is one that is “predicated on exclusion” (Munasinghe, 2005, p.155), while liminal narratives stress on the ‘otherness’ that had been displaced from the mainstream. “Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha, 1990, p.300).

It is in such a context that literature of Northeast India emerges as powerful counter-narratives that displace complacent notions of mainland India from asserting their perceived supremacy over the margins. The Northeast states had nursed an uneasy relationship with the Hindi heartland of India and had often been deliberately erased from what is touted as mainstream Indian culture. The literature from the Northeast area has made a powerful comeback in the recent decades and proudly stays away from the themes that preoccupy the official canon. While it is too simplistic to club together with the individual literary narratives of the various states under the rubric of Northeast literature, the same has been done by many critics as there are overarching themes and motifs that acknowledge a shared past. The precolonial oral narratives of the various tribes celebrated the unique and dynamic nature of the region. The Ahom dynasty in Assam nurtured a rich literary tradition and the invaluable Meitei scripts of precolonial Manipur reveal a heritage that is impressively expansive in its scope and design. The colonial need to homogenise the Northeast was an extremely complex process that shaped the later literary traditions of the region, with regard to its linguistic, cultural and political tangent. The postcolonial narratives of the region

were often in English that passionately asserted the historic and social individuality of the Northeast. Commenting on the evocative nature of Northeast literature, Vivek Menezes comments that the reader is drawn “into an unknown world: tribal and globalised at the same time, not-quite India and perfectly content to remain that way” (Menezes, 2020). The Northeast literature is now characterised by poignant resonances of cultures that remain unique in the polyphonic narratives of modern India. The present paper tries to analyse how the crucial signifiers of identity and the Self/Other dichotomy manifest in layering the narratives of a palimpsestic nation by an intense perusal of works like *The Point of Return* (2003), *Lunatic in My Head* (2007) and *The Many that I Am* (2019).

Gendered Identity and the dichotomy of Self/Other in Moulding Counter-narratives

In her Introduction to the anthology, *The Many That I Am*, Anungla Zoe Longkumer states emphatically, without any preamble, that the book is an attempt to narrate the Naga women’s account of history or specifically ‘herstory’. She says, “Instead of ‘others’ depicting a somewhat superficial image of the Nagas, it is Naga writers who are now espousing the need for honest probity into our inner selves in order to correct our past mistakes by creating a livable present” (Longkumer 2019, p.6). The Naga identity is here proudly proclaimed and the other narratives are dismissed as being “superficial”; narratives that masquerade as authentic but which lack credulity before the Naga Self. Chitra Ahanthem describes the book as “the socio-cultural history of Nagaland through its many women” (Ahanthem, 2019). One can even argue that the book and its creation constitute the emergence of a counter-narrative that revisits notions of Naga history and identity from a feminine perspective.

Identity is a crucial signifier in the creation of the Self and the process of asserting the authenticity of one’s identity is often quite complex. “Rather than being primordial, identity is constructed, and its construction is strongly influenced by politico-historical and sociocultural conditions.... Depending on the context, an individual invokes different identities at different times” (Jayaram, 2012, p.56). One constantly seeks validation from other sources to assert a particular identity.

“Even more importantly, the self is projected in the first place in order to answer the glance of the other. Consequently, identity is not merely differentiated from alterity, the other, by singling itself out from a multiplicity of others; it is itself constituted in a dialectic process that interacts with the other” (Fludernik, 2007, p.261).

The Naga women writers have come forward to posit an identity that had earlier been silenced by master narratives of both the nation and patriarchy. They have initiated the “dialectic process” by a bold assertion that refuses to capitulate before the glance of the Other.

The validation of the Self doesn’t necessarily involve a blind negation of the Other; instead, it involves a keen awareness that accepts, disputes and re-creates the imposed sense of identity. In the essay, “Outbooks”, Narola Changkija narrates with great lucidity the clash of identities in her young Naga self when she develops awareness of the Others around her. “We lived in a tribal world, a Scheduled Tribes world, where our internal realities clashed with our external state of being. We were the descendants of ancient head-hunters, but we were dependent on the generous funds of a Central Indian government. We were *not* like the plains people, the *tsumars*” (Longkumer, 2019, p.128). She is aware of their ‘otherness’ and questions their presence in the

world of the Nagas. It is this awareness that moulds her own sense of self as opposed to a militant stance of rejection or a supplicant attitude of mimicking.

The liminal narrative created by the Naga women becomes even more pertinent as it links gender with the idea of Nation/State/Tribe. Traditionally, women’s role in nationalist discourse has been subjected to specific paradigms that furthered the stereotypical depiction of women as custodians of culture. “The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of ‘female emancipation’ with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (Chatterjee, 1986, p.248). This trope in nationalist discourse is cleverly subverted in Vishu Rita Krocha’s story, “Cut Off” when Tasu the patriarch acknowledges that the stories of history and myth change for the better when women are involved. The traditional role of women as passive participants in men’s militant history is disputed when women establish peace in a situation that could have wiped out many lives. In a thorough subversion of gendered roles, the man is grateful that women intervened (Longkumer, 2019, p.35). “This may mean that women are simultaneously both less militaristic and less nationalistic because militarism is often seen as an integral facet of a national project” (Walby, 1996, p.252). War and violence are negated as constructs belonging to an outdated discourse and women chart the borders of a new discourse that looks at other alternatives as opposed to the earlier way of life.

Otherring the Self: Notion of Authenticity in Liminal Narratives

The metanarrative of the nation often imposes a set of signifiers that define the parameters of normalcy. “A shared bedrock of *pre-determined* differentials that include religion, language, ethnicity and/or caste, work in conjunction with the existing cultural systems to infiltrate the collective consciousness and become ‘normalised’” (Silva, 2004, p.15). The liminal narratives of a geographic region like the Northeast pose a threat to the metanarrative as it celebrates its ‘otherness’ and foregrounds its difference as its identity. The tension that arises when liminal narratives clash with the metanarrative often gathers its momentum from the notion of authenticity. How does one define authenticity and who is qualified to be the authentic voice of the metanarrative? Siddhartha Deb and Anjum Hasan play with the concept of authenticity when they depict how the process of othering becomes the crux for counter-narratives that deconstruct the notions of Self/ Other.

In narratives from the Hindi heartland, especially visual narratives that cater to the edicts of ‘popular (Bollywood) culture’, people from the Northeast and the Southern parts of India are caricatured, thus emphasising their ‘otherness’. Analysing the situation, Nityananda Kalita points out that this “national-centric discourse about the Northeast shaped mostly by former bureaucrats and retired army, police and intelligence officers is heavily pro-state and insensitive to the vulnerabilities of the common man and dismissive of the frequent transgressions of rights of its own citizens by the state” (Kalita, 2011, p. 1358). *The Point of Return* and *The Lunatic in my Head* eschew simplistic narratives of unity found in nationalistic discourse and address the conflict-ridden narrative of the Northeast from the perspectives of both the indigenous people and the Bengalis. The novels also subvert the Self/ Other dichotomy when the narrative is focalisedⁱ from the perspectives of non-indigenous people in Northeast who view it as home. They become the Other in the eyes of the natives who regard them as outsiders. They do not belong

to the Northeast and therefore they are the Other, and the illusion of being an Indian who has chosen to reside in another part of India becomes one that mocks its own pretentious ideological framework. In *The Point of Return*, Dr. Dam and Babu are perplexed and saddened by the stark realisation of their otherness. They are termed as useless Bengalis coming over the border (Deb, p.22). And in a very telling sentence, Deb captures the predicament of the Other, who had tried to forge a new sense of Self. "No use for Bengalis, always coming over the border." They said nothing, looking away at the Indian flag fluttering in front of the guard-house" (Deb, p.22). The Indian flag is a symbol of the nationalist discourse that harbours ideals of unity among diversity and the fragility of such ideals is exposed when Bengalis are termed as outsiders by the indigenous Hill people. The colonial era's attempt to homogenise the Northeast with the 'Indian mainland' witnessed cultural and linguistic impositions on the natives. The Britishers' attempt to standardise the vernaculars by imposing Bengali language was met with stiff opposition. The subsequent influx of Bengalis from East Pakistan during Partition and later during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war made the situation in Northeast (especially, the state of Assam) even more volatile. The indigenous people viewed the migrants with suspicion and hostility and this can be viewed as a continuum of their resistance to the erstwhile narratives of colonial hegemony. The conflict is rooted in the natives' fear of "losing cultural identity and political power and not receiving its share of the region's resources" (Kalita, 2011, p.1358). Deb's portrayal of the tension between the natives and the 'Bengalis' like Dr. Dam and Babu emphasises this aspect. Such a narrative strategy can also be viewed as a parody of the official mainstream discourse where the roles of the Self and Other are subverted.

Dr. Dam muses about how people are deeply divided on account of their ethnicity.

"There had been a time when ethnic differences had been unimportant, and when he thought about it, even now most of his tribal colleagues were remarkably unprejudiced. If anything, it was his fellow Bengalis and other nontribal groups who were insular, with a vague sense of superiority over the tribal officers (Deb, p.74).

As the novel is narrated in a reverse chronological manner, we understand that Dr. Dam makes this observation at an earlier point in time and that the passage of years has eroded the fabric of unity that the metanarrative of the nation imposed on the individual states. The metanarrative of the Indian nation carries the vestiges of the colonial mission of homogenisation and this makes it even more problematic. The insidious ways in which the colonial power controlled the Northeast and the ensuing linguistic, cultural and racial conflicts are seldom recorded in the official discourse of the nationalist struggle. The renowned political scientist, Sanjib Baruah comments on how the colonial imposition of arbitrary political borders of the Northeast catered to the Britishers' economic and administrative interests. He notes that such policies are carried forward by the Indian nation and argues that the term Northeast embodies the "history of a series of ad hoc decisions made by national security-minded managers of the postcolonial Indian state" (qtd. in Roychowdhury 2021). The conflict between the indigenous people and the Bengalis can be traced back to the colonial era, which witnessed a forceful imposition of the Bengali language on certain parts of the region. The Bengali presence in the region was perceived as an extension of the colonial regime and this worsened the relationship between the two communities. Dr. Dam's observation about the Bengalis' prejudice emphasise how the indigenous people were often alienated in their own land. As the narrative unfurls, the Bengalis are soon relegated to the status

of the Other, just as they had viewed the tribals a few years earlier. When the tribal people make this distinction between themselves and the immigrant Other, it becomes a counter-discourse to claim their sense of self that had earlier been effaced in the official narrative of the Nation. One can argue that “the novel shows the urgency of re-narrating the nation from the margin and also calls for the rethinking of the concept of nationhood and national identity or belonging.” (Mishra, 2021).

Hasan’s *Lunatic in my Head* takes this debate further when the outsiders are termed as dkhars and viewed with extreme hostility. The novel explores the seething undercurrents of the ethnic conflict that rages through the veins of Shillong. The political, regional and linguistic cartography of the Northeast had been remarkably altered during the colonial era and the initial years of the post-independence period. During the colonial period, the Bengali presence in the region was encouraged by the Britishers who wanted to assimilate the socio-cultural diversities of the various states into a homogenised mass for ease of governance. The violent undercurrents of Partition and the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 witnessed successive waves of immigrants settling in the Northeast and this further heightened the ethnic tensions in the region. The people of Northeast define identity in terms of their ethnic and linguistic markers and the presence of outsiders who attempt to dilute these signifiers of individual identity has always been a point of conflict. The conflict depicted in *Lunatic in my Head* has to be analysed from this perspective. Aman, one of the primary focalisers in the narrative, is confused and scared by the hostility that he faces from Max and his cronies because he has always considered Shillong his home. One can argue that home need not always be a location with definite spatio-temporal co-ordinates. It is a concept that is concomitant with a state of security; a feeling of being ‘at home.’ Aman is an outsider who seeks validation of his self. While he is accepted by his Khasi friends, Ribor, Ibomcha and Bodha, there is a strong wave of hostility that he faces due to his status as an outsider. Aman is caught in the ethnic tension that is one of the crucial conflicts raging within the Northeast. After decades of marginalisation, the Northeast internalises this conflict and the resultant Self/ Other dichotomy is one that had been fostered by their invisibility in the national metanarrative.

Sophie Das, a child born to a Bengali father and a ‘North Indian’ mother, internalises this conflict when she shuttles between the security provided by Kong Elsa, the Khasi matriarch and the veiled hostility that she imbibes from Jason, Elsa’s son. Her pain and humiliation at a party (Hasan p. 98-99) make her realise that the world is indeed different for different people. Sophie is ignored at the party because of her outsider status and if not for Elsa’s intervention, the child would have gone hungry. Sophie longs to belong to Elsa’s world so as to defy the mantle of the outsider. “She thought that the nicest thing, the nicest thing by far, . . . would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi” (Hasan p. 99). Sophie’s longing to be a Khasi is again a subversion of the tropes seen in mainstream narratives where the marginal dreams of a space of belonging. In the narrative of the Northeast, Sophie is the marginalised, who yearns to gain acceptance through finding Selfhood. Her self has been othered by the rejection at the party and she wishes to reclaim the same by appropriating the elusive identity of a native. The primary marker of identity here is ethnic and Sophie covets this unique identity. Bhagat Oinam comments on the complexities that underline the politics of identity in the Northeast, “As much as caste-based identification and division mark the state of the social and political structure in mainland India, the sociopolitical reality of Northeast India can be well captured through ethnicity-based

identities and their dynamics" (Oinam, 2008, p.19). Sophie's upper-caste identity becomes redundant as she lacks the ethnic status that would help her belong. Hasan has admitted that she deliberately foregrounded the narratives of migrants in the Northeast as it was a theme no one ever addressed (cited in Rahman, 2008). Thus, we have the evolution of counter-narratives within the counter-narratives of the Northeast. The Indian mainland has a number of Northeast migrants and the appalling discrimination that they face is seldom addressed in the metanarratives of the nation. Hasan's counter-narrative focuses on a conflict that stems from the colonial policy of assimilation and subsequent migrations. The steady arrival of migrants soon turned into an exodus that threatened the demographic balance of the region. The natives' hostility to the outsiders can also be viewed in the light of their growing anxiety towards what they perceived as a cultural hegemony in terms of linguistic and racial obtrusions. Therefore, Sophie and Aman become the face of the outsiders though they long to belong. The conflicts within the narrative can never be perceived in simplistic terms as it carries the embers of a tension that arose centuries ago.

The ethnic conflict raging within Shillong is emblematic of the identity conflicts that take place throughout India. It is a microcosm of the fissured world that we live in. The place is symptomatic of the nation that we belong to, an India that "is riddled by extremism and hatred for the other, for the outsider and where your identity is increasingly being attached to fixed, political categories, leaving no space for any fluidity and understanding of those who do not fit in into neat compartments" (Singh, 2019). The liminal narratives of Shillong and the other Northeast cities clash with the ossified dominant discourse that hinges on the ideas of nationalism and territorial integrity. As we are busy contesting the notion of authenticity, where does that leave the idea of India? Who then, is the real Indian, and whose narrative is the most authentic? As the earlier notions of a national discourse are now replaced by fragmented narratives, the idea of the nation itself has undergone a sea change. Khilnani notes that "the lines of political connection now run across and among these fragments, and are producing an intricate tessellation of identities" (Khilnani, 2012, p.193).

Conclusion: Towards a Palimpsestic Narrative of Nation

David Huddart defines palimpsestsⁱⁱ as "overwritten, heavily annotated manuscripts, on which earlier writing is still visible underneath newer writing: they offer a suggestive model of hybrid identity" (p.107). In an era, which celebrates the fluidity of narratives, it is perhaps imperative to explore nation as a palimpsestic narrative. A narrative that disputes canonical absolutes and embraces the protean power of nascent discourses. The literature from Northeast, both in English and in regional languages, contributes greatly to the rich yarn of a palimpsestic narrative. By foregrounding lived experiences and value systems that are distinctly different from the mainland culture, these liminal narratives forge explosive links between identity, gender, and the politics of power.

The sub-nationalist narratives of the Northeast have emerged as powerful counter-discourses that do not cater to the normative categories of the official narrative. The normative narratives that attempt to paint a glossy picture of turbulent political realities have now exploded in the face of persistent sub-nationalist currents. The monolithic ideals of religion and race; the deification of nation as motherland and the celebration of cliched ideals like unity in diversity are now actively disputed by counter-narratives. The Northeasterners' pride in their ethnic identity far surpasses

their political allegiance to the Indian nation. In the novel, *Lunatic in my Head*, Aman notices the slogan “We are Khasis by Blood, Indians by Accident” (Hasan, 2007, p.32) as he explores the city with his Khasi friend, Ribor. The slogan becomes a symbol of the principal ethnic identity that the Khasis hold dear. Rather than taking umbrage at this blatant questioning of national identity as one’s primary social marker, one should view identity as a coalescing signifier that binds together the notions of nation, tribe, community, religion and gender into a fluid construct. “Their cultural foreignness to the Indic cultural system clearly marks off the hill “tribes” from the rest of Indians. The non-Indic-ness is the mark of “tribal” identity in the Northeast” (Kalita, 2011, p.1367). The ethnonationalism of the Northeast gains momentum through such palimpsestic narratives as they contest the official discourse of a pan-Indian identity.

India is a ‘nation’ that is home to teeming multitudes that subscribe to diverse socio-cultural, linguistic and religious contexts. How then can we fixate on a notion of a singular identity? In contemporary India, the very idea of defining one’s national identity is an act that is politically charged. Oinam analyses how the concept of “othering the other” (2008, p.21) becomes crucial in the configuration of identity in Northeast India. The counter-narratives that emphasise this process of othering resonate with the reality of the Northeast as opposed to the mainland’s predilection to blatantly ignore the source of conflict. The narratives of Northeast often emphasise the motif of conflict as it outlines the volatility of its socio-political structuring. These narratives enhance the palimpsestic reality of narrating ‘India’ and the ensuing liminalities are as important, if not more important than homogenising metanarratives. “Nation and community remain important, it is just that they need to be imagined in new ways” (Huddart, 2007, p.117). While there is no need to eulogise and idealise the emerging protean narratives, one should embrace its resistance to cower before the monoliths of hegemonical structures and ideological frameworks. “There is no ideological or cultural guarantee for a nation to hold together. It just depends on human skills” (Khilnani, 2012, p.207). The power of the people to narrate and sustain their unique narratives should be lauded as it sets out to trace uncharted territories of “imagined communities.”

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- i. Focalised: A term used in narrative theory. Focalization specifies the concept of perspective and can be categorised into the focalizer (the one who sees) and the focalized (the one who is seen). Genette and Mieke Bal are the leading theoreticians who have formulated the various aspects of focalization. According to Genette, there are three categories of focalization; non-focalization or zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization. Zero focalization is characterised by a panoramic point of view. In internal focalization, events are filtered through characters internal to

the narrative. Lastly, external focalization refers to a stringent reduction in the amount of narrative information that is available.

- ii. Palimpsests are defined as manuscripts or written materials from which the earlier writing or drawing has been erased to create a new layer that can be used again. In ancient times, it was a matter of necessity to re-use these manuscripts due to the acute shortage of parchments, that were primarily used as writing material. The term has also been used in the fields of architecture and archaeology. In modern literary criticism, the idea of palimpsests has been deployed to suggest models of hybridity and plurality. Jawaharlal Nehru viewed India as a palimpsest that has layers of thoughts, beliefs and value systems inscribed as part of its rich heritage. David Huddart has commented on Salman Rushdie's play with the idea of palimpsestic history in his novels. Critics have commented that Rushdie might have borrowed this palimpsestic ideal from the ideas of Nehru. In the Indian context, one can also view the nation as a palimpsest of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial histories which exist in a continuum.

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