



**A bi-annual peer - reviewed journal of Department of
English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

**Mapping the discourse of home and identity: Understanding of marginal experiences in
Siddhartha Deb's *Point of Return*.**

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Abstract

Despite decades of intensive research, the hierarchy between the oppressor and the oppressed continue to haunt us. Several ethnic groups in Northeast India in the aftermath of the partition period have internalized the method of divide and rule and stake claims to territories for a greater autonomy which other marginalized groups also consider as a space of belonging, exploring the meanings of home vis-a-vis nostalgia and commitment. In the immediate context of post-Independence development, the term 'nation' became contested and some kind of tribal nationalism started taking place among the ethnic groups in the Northeastern region. The first generation political elites were the educated or semi-educated stock of opportunists who de-constituted and re-constituted the ethnic communities conducive to their political advantages. In this process many marginalized communities/ sub-nationalities faced the inclusion-exclusion syndrome. For creating and consolidating its respective identity, every ethnic group made effort to construct its 'other'. The ideology of the 'other' motivated and guided the identity politics in the region. Assumption is, the 'other' has come to dominate and exploit. The 'silent' or the 'silenced' subjects on the margins are a consequence of an atmosphere of mistrust generated by fears of domination and vengeance over one group by another. Narrated from the perspective of the subject or the 'other', Siddhartha Deb's novel concerns the quest for homeland, a moving account of a family who immigrated to a newly divided India picking up the pieces of a partitioned existence. Dr. Dam had settled in the neighboring Indian state of Assam after having lived for generations on a farm in erstwhile East Pakistan. The novel is not chronological and history does not operate in straight lines. Resident inside the redrawn borders, Dr. Dam's family lives a transitory existence; moving from one part of the region to another. Like most post-colonial writers Siddhartha Deb raises pertinent questions about 'adjacent' identities emerging



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out of migration and their confrontation with the different ethnic communities in the plural urban spaces of the region. The purpose of my research paper is to focus on the dilemma and trauma of the 'subaltern' communities who have been outlawed from the broader ethnic inclusion and as a result, struggle for space and acknowledgement, struggling to secure their identity and a sense of belonging in the maze of other indigenous cultures. Siddhartha Deb utilizes the mode of memory to narrate the exilic condition of these migrants who grapple with issues like home, identity, citizenship and belonging in the post-colonial nation state. The narrative also brings forth the painful process of cartographic reconfigurations of state boundaries along the ethnic lines, and the resultant violence, uprootedness and alienation. For these migrants, the oppression is double edged; the trauma of homelessness induced by partition and the resultant persecution by the militant elite in the dark underbelly of the oft-stated nationalist intentions in a post-colonial state.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Subaltern, Alienation

Why did they move, these natives of the plains, bringing their noxious, dark, sun-burnt faces to blight these mountains? Did they not foresee what would happen when such opposites met, the cool and the hot, the light and the dark, the honest and the thieving? Why did they not know their history?

-Siddhartha Deb, *The Point of Return*

The narrative of world history is shaped continuously by the process of migration. Nicholas Van Hear in his book *New Diasporas: the Mass Exodus Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* writes, "as migration has proliferated, so too has the diaspora and transnational communities, leading to increasing numbers of people with allegiances straddling their places of origin and their new homelands." These migrants are at an existential crossroad because they have to prove their loyalty to their birthplace and also towards their adopted homeland which had given them work and shelter. Struggling with a strange mixture of belonging and alienation, a migrant always carries with him a piece of earth in his clutching hands which is never released until he dies. The trauma of being denied a rightful home is a



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recurring grief for them. Positioned at the in-between spaces of nation and identity, those who have crossed the borders have always jostled for space and acknowledgement, their presence considered obstructive by the dominant ethnic groups. The concept of diversity in North East India is a complex issue since the presence of distinct ethnic communities asserting their tribal identities has led to an upsurge of violence. Late D.P Barooah writing about the predicament of the subaltern communities stated that “ethnicity does not necessarily have to give rise to violence and yet, one could easily manipulate ethnicity to throw people against one another” (viii, *Troubled Diversity*). He elaborated on the failure of the policy makers in implementing the clauses of the 1942 Quit India Resolution and the Objectives Resolution in the context of nation-building and writes,

...for peace to come and prevail, I think there is an emergent need today to cultivate a human rights approach while dealing with all problems of life: civil and political; and economic, social and cultural. Ethnicity, autonomy, and nation-building all have their legitimate shares in the process in a violence-free environment (viii).

The social, demographic and political tensions generated in the process of nation-building are too deep to gloss over and it seems the only solution considered viable by the political opportunists is throwing the foreigner's out. Because of the atmosphere of mistrust in the post-Independence India, many ethnic groups in the North East were led to believe that there was a conspiracy to “Bangladeshize” (Hazarika, 8) Assam and the North East. Even if this belief was manipulated to suit certain vested interests one cannot deny the fact that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wanted the Assam Chief Minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha “to go easy on the deportations and even stop them. Chaliha refused, saying that the problem was so critical, that Assam's demography and culture would be permanently changed” (Hazarika, 60). The patronizing attitude towards the ‘illegal migrants’ was encouraged to swell the vote banks by some corrupt politicians and the Congress with its active pro-minority crafty politics considered as the saviour of the interests of the settlers. Border crossing could either be enforced due to war-like situations or a voluntarily movement triggered by economic opportunities. Urban economies



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provide better livelihood opportunities than a sustenance land based economy. Sanjoy Hazarika in the book *Rites of Passage* explains the reason behind gradual breeding of hatred between the host community and the migrant;

Hosts don't turn against migrants until they begin feeling politically and socially threatened. Or put more simply, until the settlers begin to assume numbers which make the native community feel that they are being undercut, both culturally and physically. The Lothsampas of southern Bhutan also fall into this listing: they went as migrants and were thrown out once their usefulness was perceived as over by the ruling Bhutanese elite... (Hazarika, 93) .

The All Assam Students Union (AASU), the most influential student organization group in the state and the flag bearer of 'Save Assam to Save India' movement launched a massive protest and brutality against the 'illegal migrants' in Assam. The dominant Khasi tribe from Meghalaya under the banner of Khasi Students Union (KSU) started to dissent against the Bengali residents of Meghalaya, resenting their dominance in jobs and business. The attacks were mostly carried out in Shillong, the capital of the state. In 1980 a Bengali legislator was killed and the Bengali localities came repeatedly under systematic persecution. The attacks were mostly planned and executed in and around Durga Puja, a major festival of the Bengali Hindus. As many as 25,000 to 35,000 Bengalis had to leave Meghalaya. Some of them had settled in West Bengal and other parts of India since the 1980s. The 'Bongal Kheda' agitation which was spearheaded by the youth leaders of the Brahmaputra valley had gained quite a momentum. They used Gandhian tactics innovatively and had garnered national support and media attention to validate their cause. The Bengalis in general and the Bengali employees of the Oil installations, engineers and technicians, officers working in Government institutions had become soft targets of hostility and humiliation. Bengali clubs and schools were burnt down to ashes. Those living in the towns of Dibrugarh, Nowgong, Tezpur, Jorhat had to face betrayal from their Assamese counterparts as the Bengalis had settled in these colonial township for a long period of time and had internalized the Assamese language over the years. Yet they were assaulted and stabbed,



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their properties looted. It is difficult to believe that such large-scale violence could have materialized without the support and cooperation of those in power; various section of the Assamese upper class which was politically astute and the police authorities. As Sanjoy Hazarika mentions,

By this time, Assam was in ferment but not in flames. The latter was to follow, as a logical culmination to the mess. Marches, protests, pickets and dharnas were the order of the day. Some events were supported by government officers, who defied official orders and courted arrest, demanding the ouster of the aliens. If it was not xenophobia, then it was patriotism of a very jingoistic quality (Hazarika, 64).

The concept of 'diversity' which was employed to construct identities in the Northeastern region became the moot point for giving rise to the sentiments of tribal nationalism. As a result diversity "could not grow as a sanitized and civil category within the grand institution of the Indian state" (Ray, 57). North-East India has been a witness to many forms of violence throughout history. In the context of a turbulent history of the region and the diversity of cultures, trauma has been articulated in many forms. The year 1987 marks the brutality inflicted upon the Nepali minority in Shillong as this community became the target for mob violence. The leader of the ethnocentric Khasi group known as Demands Implementation Committee Martin Narayan Majaw blatantly stated "We don't like outsiders to stay here. We tell them, come here, appreciate the blue sky and the green hills, and then go away" (Mitra, India Today). During 1979, the state experienced many cases of communal riots which snowballed into rioting, confiscation of trading licenses of the Bengali traders, eviction from rented apartments, arbitrarily beating up of the minorities, to name a few. Consequently curfews became frequent as much as the arrests of Bengali minorities to appease the *Dorbar Shnong* (village level tribal councils).

Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* evocatively narrates the complex and passionate journey of Dr. Dam and his son Babu (partly the family of Deb himself) in a city changed and politically charged in the aftermath of the partition of East Pakistan where thousands of refugees



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shuttled between borders again, “paying the toll in blood”, writes Nilanjana Roy in the *Outlook* (23/9/2002). The writings of Siddhartha Deb are self-reflective and insightful because the context evoked by his works are references to the communal strife between the Bengali immigrants in the Northeast and the indigenous tribe of Khasis. Growing up in Shillong during the troubled years of 1970s and 1980s, Siddhartha Deb raises pertinent questions on ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ in a valley which has emotionally and politically seceded into its own space, inconsiderate of those who also register a certain affiliation and commitment towards the adopted home. In an interview “Against Forgetting: A conversation with Siddhartha Deb” the author says “I’m from a lower middle-class background, and things were very precarious for me and my family in my youth, and writing was a way of understanding the things that were happening to me and to others around me... Ideas of home and belonging are complicated, and much of my fiction explores these complications” (qtd. in Bhatt, 2006:201-5). Writing from the periphery, Siddhartha Deb shows how his father Dr. Dam, an honest and exemplary veterinary doctor working in the government hospital, had to face the high-handedness and humiliation from the corrupt officers at the pension office. Having lost his ancestral farming land during the bloody riots of 1947, Dr. Dam’s ancestors had left behind their homes in East Pakistan to create a new home in the newly partitioned India. The geopolitical shifts controlled his destiny and the struggle to build and rebuild a home is a recurring motif in the narrative,

Dr. Dam had only known temporary places of various kinds, ever since he had left the village and the mud hut he had been born in, turning his back on the unpredictable, temperamental river... At the age of fifteen, his quest for a place in the modern world had taken him to Macpherson Hostel in Calcutta, across the street from the Bengal Veterinary College in Beliaghata... With graduation and a job as a junior doctor with the Assam Veterinary Department he had accompanied his tin trunk to different towns and outposts of the vast north-eastern state of Assam, sprawling wildly across a distant corner of the Indian subcontinent. He had unpacked his same meagre belongings over and over again in lonely bungalows with their wooden frames painted in fresh black tar, thinking mostly of



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the money order to be sent to the Thikarbasti slums in Silchar where he had settled his family (Deb, 28).

Nabanipa Bhattacharjee places her argument quite rationally when she writes that “While their Pakistani counterparts eventually became Bangladeshis, Sylhet is in India continued to negotiate their identity in and outside Assam” (223). Quite Babu, who is Deb himself, could not understand the submissive and slavish demeanor with which Dr. Dam used to conduct himself in both public and private life. His growing dissociation and discontent from his parent’s nationalistic idealism is understandable because Babu was a child of post-Independence India where sub-nationalism within the newly carved boundaries led to inter-community and inter-ethnic conflicts. The Northeast region was remodeled and remolded to suit the politics of the dominant tribal communities. Dr. Dam had taken the blows which had befallen him steadily, at regular intervals, without any signs of resistance or complaints. Deb writes, “he fell, he picked himself up, and he went on, absorbing the effects of the disruptions into a ceaseless but unemotional routine” (8). Resident inside redrawn borders, Dr. Dam’s earnest wish was to build a home on a piece of land he owns in Silchar and put an end to his transitory existence as a migrant. The state of Assam to which Dr. Dam owed his allegiance shrunk from within as new tribal states were formed, “their fresh cartographic boundaries indicating more than anything a growing uncertainty about the relationship between the hills and plains” (29). The scene at the pension office acts in accordance with the growing insider-outsider hostility plaguing the State and pushing the settlers towards the extreme end of the periphery. The tribal man at the office derisively scrutinized Dr. Dam and growled, “Bengalis...No use for Bengalis, always coming over the border” (15). Exercising hegemony on the minority population, many tribal communities tried to prove their superiority by adopting either ideological domination or taking up arms to assert their rights. An internal colonization was making its inroads into the hill states of Northeast playing on the debatable plank of ideology and power. Signs of dissent among the hill people, the armed insurrections and kidnappings, endless exchange of words between ministers and bureaucrats from Delhi and the tribal leaders undermined the sovereignty of the



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subject thereby projecting them as having no “geo-political determinations” (Spivak) to safeguard their rights.

In 1969, Dr. Dam was transferred to the hill capital of Assam and he went dutifully from the dusty roads of the plains to the neighboring hills of Shillong covering a journey of not more than four hours by road from Guwahati. He had meticulously carved a temporary home for himself in Narangi with his life's savings “but the boundaries of human expectations rarely match those set by higher powers” (31) and despite having all the legal documents of the land, Dr. Dam's labour and desire were crushed under the orders of the bureaucrat's bulldozer. Siddhartha Deb brings his readers on the verge of emotional breakdown when he describes the rubbles of walls and ceilings crushing down on his dreams and hopes,

He walked with a sense of purpose towards his house, broom in one hand, and it was only when he approached his land that he saw the government bulldozers standing on what supposedly belonged to him...A supervisor in a blue helmet had tried to chase him away as he stood there with the broom in his hand. He had stood there aghast, not even knowing where to begin... (32).

In the late 1940s and the beginning of 1960s, the *Bongal Kheda* agitation had slowly started spreading in the Brahmaputra valley. There was sustained agitation in Assam where apart from the loot and ransom, the Bengali students of Guwahati University, Dibrugarh Medical College and Assam Medical College were forcibly expelled from the institutions. Bengali Hindu houses were looted, burnt and the occupants were beaten up and in worst case, stabbed to death. The solid foundation of bricks and concrete which would testify his existence in this adopted homeland and shake off the stigma of a refugee was denied to Dr. Dam. And by the time he had realized that his property will never be relinquished back to him, it was already too late as a *dkhar* or an ‘outsider’ was prohibited from acquiring land or land rights in Meghalaya under the ‘Protective Discrimination Act’. The only hope of ever owning a home was his land in Silchar,



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The house he would build in Silchar was a last-ditch attempt to find a resting place, to face the reality of retirement and not to move from rented house to rented house on an ever-tightening spiral, so that he could ultimately set forth on his final journey from the same emotional space at which he had arrived fifty-six years earlier, the space some of us call home (32).

Registering a certain affiliation to the idea of home, authors Blunt and Varley in the article “Introduction: Geographies of Home” state that home is “a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life” (2004:3-6). The loss and nostalgia inflicting Dr. Dam’s life has deepened his understanding of the meaning of home. Traumatic events like war, displacement, forced exile, takes an individual away from his community leaving him/her forlorn and helpless. In the novel, Deb narrates the plight of those immigrants whose status has been vilified during pre-Independence as the unwanted ‘other’ and also during post-partition era as the outsider ‘other’. In the novel Deb writes “You cannot be an exile in your own country” (155). Babu had always considered Shillong to be his home until the word *Dkhar* or foreigner was loud enough to bring back the stigma of migrancy and his family was once again thrown into the precarious existence as an ‘outsider’. Arindam Sarma in his article “Migrancy and Memory in Siddhartha Deb’s Novel *The Point of Return*” writes about the rising hostility and enrage over the presence of non-tribal in Meghalaya, “the so-called anti-*dkhar* -foreign dogs-riots continued well into the 1980s, forcing these people to leave Shillong and disperse to other states” (135). But where is this imagined ‘other state’? Would not it be another ‘contested city ground’ where the dominant community will be rioting against these so called ‘outsiders’? In Meghalaya the immigrants were expected to carry their identity cards at all times to prove their Indian citizenship. Babu experiences the ethnic tensions first hand in Shillong, his homeland, the “confluence of childhood hopes and a faith in the future” (187) where his family had to suffer the indignities of the body and mind. Subjectively dealing with the concept of home, Deb says “Ideas of home and belonging are complicated, and much of my fiction explores these complications” (qtd. in Bhatt, 2006). Playing the game of cricket in the



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Bengali neighborhood called ‘Rilbong’ with his Khasi and Assamese friends and rejoicing the taste of a beef sandwich, Babu was oblivious of the changing political landscape of his hometown where “nothing had changed, not just then, and yet everything changed” (175). His world was different unlike the world of assault and humiliation faced by his ancestors which Deb recalls as “little blips on the radar of my existence...They were part of the adult world that one could always run from” (175).

But once the political assault raised its ugly head, friends turned into sworn enemies. Agendas were laid down, deliberation were made by the student union to drive away those who too considered these hills as their homes while the town held its breath “waiting for the declarations that would come after, ranging from punitive measures against an offending non-tribal family to an increase in taxes for non-tribal businessmen” (176). A new lexicon of anger and hatred had taken the valley into its grips, redrawing the boundaries into ‘us’ and ‘them’, inciting fear and collective unease. For Babu, Shillong was the only home that he knew of and during those times he was unable to decipher the conspiratorial whisper in the atmosphere, “...by some undefined process, the ‘we’ became composed exclusively of non-tribals, and the tribal friends who had been a part of my life since the age of six faded away, joining groups of their own” (177). The situation remained volatile for them until the author’s family finally left for Silchar, seeking home, a place where there will be no prejudiced landlord, where life would not hang on the uncertainties of a quicksand. Sanjoy Hazarika mentions that the agitation in the Brahmaputra valley “rarely found an echo” (Hazarika, 2000:68) in the Barak valley where the population mostly consisted of Bengali-speaking Hindus and Muslims. For people like Dr. Dam, mental mapping of the addresses emphasize a sense of protection and belonging, however fragile. Both his homes had been destroyed by forces of separatist policies of the state which had rendered him to survive in temporary and provisional situations. The wound inflicted by the anti-foreigners movement and the subsequent dislocation from the hills remained unhealed in Dr. Dam’s psyche.



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Large scale demonstrations were carried out hurling stray words of abuse, black and streaky posters staring right back at the presumed aliens/ ‘outsiders’, “Non-tribal boys are warned against talking to tribal girls. Or else steps will be taken against outsiders. Such forms of antagonistic expression are termed as ‘nativism’ by Weiner where members of the local or indigenous ethnic group are indignant towards the presence of the Others (those who do not belong to the indigenous group). Deb problematizes the notion of ‘home’ and asks “Where could one go back to?” and “What had been left behind could not even be given a name” (Deb,178). For a helpless bystander like Babu, home was the lakes and parks and houses where he was born, the land of Shillong was in his blood. Deb says that he never realized how this quaint and silent valley suddenly turned into a battlefield accommodating opposed points of view,

...I went through periods of completely different emotions, oscillating between a desire to blend with the town and the insiders and a virulent hatred for a place and a desire to leave it for ever so that I would never hear that word, ‘Foreigner’, again. My father and I never spoke of the way things were, keeping our separate worlds to ourselves (179).

Historians and writers have written extensively on the trauma of partition affecting the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs but what fails to get incorporated in mainstream partition literature is that the eastern side of India equally faced the brunt of this cartographic division. The fact that the eastern side of the Indian sub-continent also underwent (and continues to be afflicted) intense period of unpredictable traumatic events remains substantially overlooked. The scholarly works of Anindita Dasgupta on the narratives of Sylheti partition migrants in the Northeast Indian state of Assam and its periphery reveals how these *bhodrolok* were never refugees but victims of rivalry between the Assamese who did not want the Sylhetis to be relocated in the Brahmaputra valley and the Sylhetis themselves. In the article “Denial and resistance: Sylheti Partition ‘refugees’ in Assam” Anindita Dasgupta mentions,

All post-partition riots are remembered by the Sylheti *bhodrolok* as having being organized not by the Muslims, but by the Assamese Hindus who did not want the Sylheti refugees to relocate themselves in the Brahmaputra valley: They (the Assamese) wanted



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Sylhet and all the Sylhetis to go to Pakistan. This was how partition was remembered and narrated by the Sylheti *bhodrolok* who lived through it (Dasgupta, 344).

Those Bengali Hindus who were demographically mapped as citizens of the national system under the redrawn borders had become ‘outsiders’ overnight as new battle-lines came into configuration in particular localities in post-colonial India. Towards the end, Siddhartha Deb bearing the role of the ‘teller of tales’ makes an attempt to make sense of the past; his father’s quite but arduous journey in conflict-torn Shillong and the precarious nature of their existence in the nation’s map drawn hastily for utilitarian convenience by the agents of power,

Depending on person and situation, I assemble maps, photographs and words, call on memory to furnish further details that will impart some sense of where I lived, something beyond a dim compensation of remote beauty and even more remote violence (Deb, 160).

Babu’s compares his lived experiences of Shillong to that piece of earth clutched tightly in one’s hands which is never released until and unless the bearer dies. Having relocated to Calcutta and Delhi and later in New York, a whiff of familiar scent, snatches of a song carrying the coordinates of the place or even the sound of rain lulled him back to the government quarter nestled in the hill which was ‘home’ for him. Babu would find meanings in scraps and bits like an archaeologist digging through the ruins of the past. The notion of ancestral village was quaint and distant for Babu and he was always amused how regressive was the world that his father used to inhabit with his stoic attitude towards life. As the xenophobic incidents in the town began to multiply, Babu’s illusory idea of ‘hometown’ began dwindling. The local boys with whom he had once shared a friendly match of cricket would now gang up and weighed the ‘outsiders’ with the hillman’s eyes. A vicious change had overcome the old neighborhood and fear had become an integral part of his life. Years later, the memories of the place continue to haunt him and a strange whisper of the word *Dkhar* or foreigner incites fear in him, taking him back to the night when the “boots were marching up and down...handing over his memory of that fear and uncertainty” (Deb,112). In the concluding lines of the final chapter “Leaving Home”, Babu, it seems, had come to terms with



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his nomadic existence and had decided to let go of his idealized construction of home and homeland knowing that memories are the only assets which will never fall prey to bureaucratic agendas;

I look at my birthplace, knowing that I will never see it again. I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen. But how you achieve that future is no longer my concern...I have truly let go, I know, as I step past the impatient conductor and the door closes behind me (Deb, 227).

Paulo Freire wrote about the predicament of the oppressed communities and he stated that “in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (*The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). Every writer representing the marginalized community wants to drift away from internalizing the opinions propagated by the bourgeoisie class. The difficulty Jan Muhamed holds, is in locating the postcolonial subject in the centre of a literary text. The cultural centre has always projected its fantasies on minority groups in a manner that denies them the right to an independent formulation of identity, history, representation and self-perception. The Sylheti population in India continues to negotiate their identity in and outside Assam. Due to the absence of any territorial affinity with Bengal and a troubled political location in the Northeast, their identity, although distinct in character, had to grapple with the homogenizing motive of the Assamese and the indifference shown by larger Bengali nations. In the communally polarized climate of India in general and Northeast in particular, the Sylheti population often run the risk of being labeled as foreigners, non-citizens, and are seen as threats to the national security.

In the novel, Siddhartha Deb projects an intense sense of awareness of his Sylheti culture and the eventual loss and recovery that came with his negotiation with the ‘other’ dominant culture in the Northeastern state of Meghalaya.

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