



The Politics of (Un)Belonging: Critiquing Select Short Fictions by Janice Pariat

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Abstract

“19/87” and “Laitlum,” the fictional works of Janice Pariat, a Khasi writer from North-East India, offer insights into the complex issues of identity formation and the politics of belonging and unbelonging in the region. North-East India, with its diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, can be viewed as a microcosm of India itself. Yet, much of the immigration in this region occurred after the East India Company’s annexation of the area in 1826, leading to the exploitation of resources and subjugation of its people by colonial and postcolonial Indian governments, resulting in cultural imperialism and social trauma. This shifting notion of the insider-outsider dichotomy is not only a subject of political discourse but also a recurrent theme in the literature of the region. Pariat’s two short stories capture the recent political turmoil between the Khasis and non-Khasis (outsiders) in Shillong after the Independence. The author depicts the socio-cultural and economic realities of the Khasis and non-Khasis during and after the colonial era. By illustrating the possibility of authentic human connections across cultural and social boundaries, her works aim to dismantle the artificial construct of a pure Khasi identity.

Keywords: belonging, unbelonging, Khasi; *dkhar*, North-East India; outsider/within

Introduction

The region of North-East India is often characterised as a space where inter-ethnic conflict is endemic, as diverse ethnic groups seek to secure increased territorial autonomy or exercise their right to

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self-determination. This dynamic is manifest in a range of movements, such as those advocating for Gorkhaland, Nagalim, Bodoland, Karbi Anglong, Tipraland, Garoland, and Kamtapur. While some of these struggles may be framed as “separatist movements,” others seek to establish autonomous councils or new states in order to achieve a higher degree of sub-national autonomy (Wenner 156). Within this context, insurgency and ethnic violence may be viewed as a means of articulating differences by communities that have been marginalised, as they utilise violent political tactics to confront the persistent discourse of subordination imposed by the dominant group. Meghalaya, one of the North-East states, has been relatively less turbulent compared to its neighbouring states that have grappled with multiple insurgent groups. However, ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribal population and the non-tribal settler communities have persisted since its inception in 1972. Economic migration, particularly from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other parts of India, before and after the colonial era, has created a sense of unease among the locals, as these migrant communities dominate various economic sectors, including businesses, labour, and employment opportunities (Haokip 303). This has resulted in ethnic clashes between the indigenous tribals and migrant non-tribal communities in 1979, 1987, and 1992. During the 1980s ethnic riots, the Bengali, Nepali, Bihari, and Marwari communities were the main target, while in the 1990s the Bengali community suffered the most, resulting in an exodus of 25,000 to 35,000 individuals to other parts of India, especially West Bengal. The number of Bengalis in Meghalaya has significantly decreased from 8.13% of the population in 1981 to 5.97% in 1991, as documented by Phukan (99-100). Despite some improvement in ethnic relations between the tribals and non-tribals in the mid-1990s, there have been recurrent flare-ups of ethnic tensions that cannot be overlooked.

The intricate and unstable socio-political landscape of Meghalaya is deeply embedded within a complex network of cultural, historical, and economic narratives that shape the region’s identity. With the absence of a viable political resolution to the existing societal challenges, members of the intellectual elite, who have been directly affected by these issues, often use literary

endeavours to give voice to their experiences. Their literary works act as a bridge between the lack of effective representation and the rejection of political solutions. While North-East Indian literature has been critiqued for being conflict-ridden (Longkumer 2), a closer examination reveals that these writings, at some point, strive towards peace. Celebrated Khasi writer Janice Pariat's short story collection, *Boats on Land*, is one such work that depicts the socio-cultural and economic realities of the Khasis and non-Khasis during and after the colonial era. The selected stories for this study, "19/87" and "Laitlum," set in post-independent Shillong, capture the recent political unrest between the Khasis and non-Khasis (outsiders) with depth and sensitivity.

The Politics of (Un)Belonging and the Narrative Agency

As the title suggests, the story "19/87" is situated within a period of heightened unrest and inter-ethnic conflict in Meghalaya, brought about by several insurgent groups, including the Khasi Students Union and the Hynniewtre National Liberation Council. The story traces the life of Banri, a young Khasi man who forms a friendship with Suleiman, a Muslim tailor and "dkhar", a Khasi term for "outsider" or "foreigner" to the tribal hills, despite their shared citizenship in India. The narrative foregrounds unconventional and alternative perspectives on notions of belonging and indigeneity within a specific locality, while also illuminating marginalised expressions of dissent against the idea of cultural purity. The dichotomy between tribal and non-tribal groups in the region of Meghalaya has been heavily politicised, resulting in the portrayal of non-tribal groups as outsiders who violate the rights of indigenous people, leading to recurring conflicts over several decades. The creation of new ethnolinguistic states has not fully resolved these tensions, as "non-ethnic polities" and "trans-ethnic clans" persist within these geopolitical zones (Ramirez 94-6). As Horowitz argues that ethnicity is often associated with "hostility towards outgroups" (7), this resulted in non-tribal groups being perceived as infiltrators, intensifying the persistent conflicts that have characterised the region. Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the stranger is applicable here, as it emphasises the profound threat that the stranger figure poses, surpassing that of an enemy. The social positioning of the

stranger makes a relationship with them almost impossible, as their unfamiliarity and perceived otherness challenge the foundations of social order and stability. The stranger stands between friend and foe, order and chaos, the inside and the outside (Bauman 61).

In “19/87,” Pariat employs the ambiguous situation, symbolised by the slash in the title, to investigate the potential for sociation with the stranger. The author seeks to challenge the common assumption that when a stranger enters a new social sphere, they must necessarily be viewed with suspicion or hostility. Instead, Pariat aims to encourage a more inclusive approach that recognises the value of engaging with the stranger rather than marginalising or excluding them. Mara Matta argues that Pariat’s intimate portrayal of the *dkhar*, Suleiman, seeks to disprove the notion that the outsider must be viewed as an enemy and instead explores the possibility of sociation with the outsider as a friend (52). Consequently, the story attempts to “deconstruct the artificial idea of a pure khasiness” (53) by demonstrating the potential for genuine human connection across cultural and social barriers. Pariat’s narrative about Suleiman is based on a true incident in which a Muslim tailor was caught in the crossfire between police and local militants in Shillong, Meghalaya. In 1987, the region witnessed a resurgence of violent uprisings targeting the *dkhar* community, involving arson and physical violence. Certain Khasi student groups and political figures were primarily responsible for leading the demonstrations, which culminated in the destruction of an entire neighbourhood. Suleiman, as a *dkhar*, is cognizant of the perilous circumstances unfolding in his community. He is mindful that his neighbours, including Usman and his family, have fled to safety due to the mounting dangers (Pariat 98). Suleiman also notices that the number of Muslim families in the area has dwindled owing to the persistent threats they face. Having resided in the area for two to three decades, Suleiman has no other place to go.

As the plot unfolds, the unexpected friendship between Suleiman and Banri reveals the intricate complexity of their lives and their relationship during the tumultuous times of the 1987 riots. Despite the stark differences in social positioning between Suleiman, a Muslim outsider and tailor, and Banri, a Khasi tribal

worker, their bond lays bare the fallacy of essentialist categorisations and the dangers of racial profiling. This narrative underscores the crucial role of relationality in shaping identity formation and illuminates the intricate interplay between individual agency and social structures in shaping inter-group dynamics. By rejecting reductive and homogenising categorisations, this account stresses the necessity of context-sensitive and nuanced approaches to community building and identity formation. Suleiman's persistent efforts to position himself within the boundaries of insiders, despite the strict limitations imposed by codified ethnic and religious norms, reflect his ardent pursuit of cultural adaptation and social acceptance. This pursuit necessitates a high level of cultural proficiency and strategic manipulation of established conventions. Suleiman's continuous renegotiation of the parameters of his existence highlights a nuanced and intricate identity that emerges from navigating the periphery of dominant societal norms while also participating in their conventions. His quest to navigate a space that carries a potential for violence necessitates a delicate balance between acceptance and detachment, which calls for the adoption of the "outsider/within" role as a mechanism of self-preservation. His proclivity for kite flying as a form of cultural capital serves as a clear manifestation of Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the role of cultural practices in shaping an individual's social standing. His resolute pursuit of proficiency in this cultural practice is indicative of his efforts to accumulate cultural capital, which can provide social benefits and grant entry to exclusive networks and resources that are otherwise inaccessible to marginalised individuals, "Kite warriors wage a faceless war. In the city, on rooftops and terraces and small open car parks, the enemy is hidden, concealed at the other hand of the string, probing the sky with slim, curving weapons." (Pariat 66). His adoption of the "outsider/within" role and his quest for cultural capital expose the intricacies of identity formation in hierarchically organised societies, highlighting the impact of cultural practices on an individual's social placement. His kite flying mastery pursuit signifies his desire for social inclusion and mobility, offering a profound inquiry into the interplay among cultural practices, social identity, and power dynamics in society. Constrained as a subaltern lacking agency and voice, Suleiman navigates obscure paths to

survive, avoiding contact with Khasis, who enforce strict social separation (Matta 56). Insider norms regulate social interaction, with violations and failures to conform to outsider identity performance resulting in serious consequences. An example is Suleiman's attraction to Christine, a Khasi neighbour girl who occasionally flirts with him, as described by Pariat, "He'd be accused of stealing Khasi women away from their men. And who knew what might happen then? At the moment, it was manageable, leaving his house only if he had to, stocking up on food for weeks at a stretch." (Pariat 68-69). In the North-East context, minority groups that are not believed to pose an actual threat to the dominant majority are often considered obstacles to the promotion of sub-national ethnos and cultural purity. They are perceived as an extra presence that does not fit into the cultural imagination of a homogeneous group that upholds a specific set of majoritarian ideas and cultural values. Arjun Appadurai describes this growing hostility towards minority others as a "narcissistic process" in nationalism, in which majorities believe they are at risk of becoming minor and fear that minorities could become the dominant force. This process leads to the formation of predatory identities that require the extinction of another collectivity for their survival (Appadurai 51).

To discuss the "fear of small numbers" is to engage in a discourse of exclusion that seeks to maintain the cultural purity and exclusivity of the dominant majority. This fear, as described by Appadurai, is based on the idea that the mere presence of a minority other poses a threat to the majority's identity. In "19/87," this fear is evident in the treatment of Suleiman, whose attempts to navigate ethnic and religious boundaries are met with suspicion and accusations of impurity. Suleiman's very existence serves as a reminder of the dominant group's identity's fragility, resulting in his constant marginalisation and scrutiny. In contemporary sociopolitical contexts, there is a rise in predatory identities that idealise majoritarianism and ethnic purity, leading to the rejection of even the smallest minority groups within national borders (Appadurai 53). This tendency towards a unified ethnic identity is performative rather than purely ideological, as it enforces a dominant cultural imposition that effaces the diversity of voices and

identities present within a society. In the diverse and complex space of Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, migrant settlers from various cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds constitute a minority. They are broadly categorised into non-tribals, known as “dkhar”, and non-native tribal communities. However, an “us” versus “them” mentality pervades the inter-group relations, reflecting the asymmetrical power dynamics within the discursive field of the city. Indigenous tribals seek to promote a 'sons of the soil' policy that excludes and marginalises non-tribal settlers based on a myth of originary purity. The 2011 census data indicates a decline in the proportion of non-tribals in the population of Meghalaya, due to out-migration. However, this statistical observation runs counter to the perception among indigenous tribes, fueled by political parties and pressure groups, of an influx of outsiders. This perception underscores the insider-outsider tensions that characterise the politics of belonging and exclusion in a multicultural society. The ambivalent positionality of migrant settlers in Shillong’s cultural space reflects this tension between the desire for assimilation and the need for differentiation.

In another story, "Laitlum", Pariat illustrates the Khasi people’s struggle to preserve their cultural identity and territorial integrity. The title itself signifies the Khasi people’s strong desire to protect their ethnicity and land, with Laitlum symbolising the ancestral homeland of the Khasi people. The Khasi people’s culture, identity, and history are deeply embedded in their land, rendering it an inextricable component of their being. This attachment to the land is exploited by politicians and communal groups to foment the younger generation's hatred against all immigrant intruders, eventually leading to interethnic conflict. While outsiders faced minimal resistance during the British administration, the Khasi people presently resist their presence, considering it a violation of their territorial sovereignty. The exact cause of the unrest in Shillong during the late 1980s remains undisclosed by Pariat, but the story reveals it gradually. The setting of the story “Laitlum” is the vibrant city of Shillong in Meghalaya. Unlike the typical conflicts between insurgents and state forces, this narrative centres on the tensions between the Khasi people and the *dkhars*. This is why, Anku, an Assamese boy, who forms a close relationship with

the narrator, experiences apprehension about departing from Shillong:

‘But why?’ I cried. . .

‘It’s my mother. . .

‘She says she’s had enough, that she wants to be with her own people. She said to abba it was either her or Shillong.’ (Pariat 132)

The bond between Anku and the narrator is deeply intertwined with the former’s fondness for Shillong, his place of origin. Anku is distressed by the notion of leaving Shillong, as he harbours a profound attachment to the place. Nevertheless, the concept of departing from Shillong has been instilled in the younger generation by their forebears, and Anku’s father also grapples with this predicament before eventually departing. Whereas the preceding generation viewed Shillong as a land of opportunities, the succeeding generation views it as their birthplace. This establishes an intense and unshakeable connection between the land and its inhabitants, as evidenced by Anku’s father’s and Chris and Melvin’s family’s emotional attachment to Shillong. Furthermore, their reverence for Khasi customs is evident in their adherence to traditional Khasi funeral rituals following their grandmother’s demise, “True to Khasi tradition, one they’d adopted as part of having lived in Shillong for many generations, the family gathered to ‘said jain’, to wash household clothes at Dwar Ksuid.” (Pariat 140). Set in the early 1990s, a period marked by political violence and curfews, the story depicts the life of an unnamed young girl who narrates her experiences, including her friendship with Anku, a spirited Assamese boy living nearby, and her rebellious and pampered sister Grace’s romance with Chris, a Chinese boy. All these characters share a common aspiration for freedom from the constraints of their surroundings, leading them to undertake a journey to Laitlum, a secluded hilltop situated an hour away from the turmoil of Shillong. For them, Laitlum serves as a haven of tranquillity and respite from the unrest and chaos of Shillong:

‘Why is this place called Laitlum?’ asked Melvin suddenly.

‘It means where the hills are set free,’ answered Grace. . .
‘When you’re sitting here,’ said Chris finally, ‘all the shit in life seems far away.’ (Pariat 138-9)

The characters in the story perceive Laitlum as a potent symbol of their quest for liberty and placidity, serving as a means of escape from the tempestuous and troubled milieu, as well as the pervasive grip of biases and hostility pervading the urban environment they inhabit. Nonetheless, their idyllic refuge is ephemeral, as a tragic event transpires when both Chris and Melvin perish by drowning in a river a few months later. Ultimately, Anku and his family vacate Shillong and move to Dibrugarh, Assam, to evade the escalating conflict, a decision mirrored by Chris and Melvin’s parents, who also leave the city due to the intensifying extortion demands imposed by militant factions in the state.

In the context of Meghalaya, the non-tribal community or dkhars, continue to face difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging within the tribal community, despite their prolonged residence. This can be attributed to the fact that the tribal population’s identity is intimately connected with the land, endowing them with an inherent sense of attachment and belonging. However, the first generation of immigrants view the land as “a land of opportunity” that provides material and economic benefits rather than an emotional connection (Biswas & Das 74). As a result, their relationship with the land differs significantly from that of subsequent generations. The non-tribal community, displaced from their ancestral lands, has sought refuge in the territory of the Khasi people, where they are compelled to coexist with a community whose identity is intricately linked to the land. The politics of nationalism propagated by the tribal community remain a source of estrangement for the dhar community, as they are unable to assert a shared affinity with the land. Nonetheless, both communities share an emotional attachment to the land, albeit with subtle nuances (Biswas & Das 75). While the Khasis may not experience an identity crisis within their homeland, the non-tribals are in a perpetual state of grappling with their sense of belonging, as exemplified in Pariat’s fictional characters like Suleiman. The

acceptance and rejection, love and hatred, friendship and animosity they encounter from the tribal community further compound this struggle. This situation is evident in the everyday existence of Suleiman, who encounters persistent expressions of antipathy and hostility from the locals. Top of Form, “Often at night, though, there were stones thrown on his roof, shouts resounding in the street—*Dkhar liah, mih na Shillong.*’ You bastard outsider, get out of Shillong. These were the things, thought Suleiman, that weren’t reported in newspapers.” (Pariat 101). This has led Suleiman estranged from the land he previously considered his own as a result of the exclusionary practices he has encountered from the tribal population. This has led to feelings of detachment and isolation, engendering a profound sense of unbelongingness. The symbolic title of the story, “19/87”, denotes a disjuncture between past and present, serving as a metaphor for the displacement and alienation that permeate the narrative. The numbers “19” and “87” represent a significant divide that separates Suleiman’s current predicament from his roots. However, Suleiman’s root is not solely an external entity; instead, it is intimately connected to his sense of self, as he regards the land of Shillong as an inherent component of his identity. Regrettably, Suleiman’s affiliation with his surroundings has been corroded by cultural stereotypes and animosity, resulting in sentiments of estrangement and dissatisfaction. This experience reflects the wider predicament of marginalised individuals, who must navigate complex issues of identity and belonging in the face of social exclusion and discrimination.

The examination of the notion of self within the Khasi community reveals that their conception of identity plays a critical role in maintaining their distinction from non-indigenous communities. The boundaries enforced between these groups are representative of a power dynamic that affords the Khasi people an opportunity to establish dominance over minority non-indigenous groups. Furthermore, cultural stereotypes are employed as a means of perpetuating this dynamic, which are often based on ethnocentric prejudices. As Lehtonen suggests, such cultural stereotypes used in intercultural settings frequently reveal indications of ethnocentrism:

Cultural stereotypes, such as comparisons between us and other, are also intertwined with the concept of ethnocentricity. In cultural stereotypes, the 'other' is usually valued negatively in comparison with "us" and our culture, which we see as 'normal', 'natural', and 'correct', and the customs and the ethical values which we feel are universally valid. (62)

Inter-group comparisons within intercultural contexts can reveal the cultural stereotypes that are employed to reinforce asymmetrical relations. In the case of the Khasi community in Meghalaya, such stereotypes have significant effects not only on their social interactions but also on their broader relationships. It is within this context of cultural difference and power dynamics that one must understand the Khasi community's self-ascription and group membership. For the Khasis, ethnic identity serves as a marker that reinforces their differentiation from non-indigenous counterparts, reflecting the underlying power dynamics that shape intercultural relations rather than being a mere matter of social distinction. The characters of Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin share a profound attachment to Shillong, a place that they have come to regard as their "home" and their "belonging". However, their sense of belonging is challenged by the inter-group conflict and cultural stereotyping that they encounter, which often escalate into violent outbursts. As a result, these characters are deprived of the foundational prerequisites for the development of a sense of belonging. They are driven by an innate desire to locate a means of feeling that they belong to a larger entity, be it a state, territory, culture, or group. For instance, Chris's attraction to Laitlum and his family's execution of traditional Khasi funeral rites can be construed as an instance of this quest for belongingness. The yearning for Laitlum by Chris and Melvin and the pursuit of friendship by Suleiman can be read as an allegory for the quest for home in a world marked by detachment and dislocation. The conditions that give rise to this pursuit of belongingness are rooted in the sensation of "unhomeliness," a term that Homi K. Bhabha derives from Freud's "Unheimlich" or "Uncanny". According to Bhabha, the "unhomely" state is not merely a state of being deprived of a home or experiencing homelessness. Instead, it is a

state in which the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the intimate and the alien, have been blurred. It is a condition in which the notion of home has been destabilised and brought into question, propelling characters like Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin to engage in an incessant search for something that can furnish them with a sense of belonging.

The quest for friendship can be interpreted as a means of fostering a sense of home by establishing deep and significant interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the yearning for Laitlum can be perceived as an effort to reclaim a sense of rootedness to a place, counterbalancing the pervasive sense of disconnection that characterises the postmodern era. Bhabha wrote, "In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting." (141). Amid inter-ethnic conflict and cultural stereotypes, the sensation of being unhomed emerges as a disorienting experience that erodes one's sense of belonging. The loss of a once-familiar home engenders feelings of alienation, frustration, and separation, leading to a fragmented sense of self and a destabilised relationship with place and identity. This quest for a stable sense of belonging is an allegorical pursuit of an ideological construct, emblematic of security, comfort, and familiarity. In the postcolonial context, identity formation involves a fusion of the familiar and the unfamiliar as individuals negotiate an uncertain and disorienting terrain. According to Bhabha's application of Freud's concept of the Uncanny, the separation between the conscious and subconscious leads to an unsettling experience where the familiar becomes strange. In this way, the intrusion of the outside world into the home destabilises the once-stable identity, causing the homely space to become unhomely.

Conclusion

Janice Pariat's stories, thus, offer a nuanced and insightful examination of the intricate and multifaceted issues that underlie the politics of belonging and unbelonging in the context of Meghalaya. Her work underscores the potential for cultural hybridity and negotiation to foster pathways towards reconciliation and

comprehension, even in the face of deeply rooted differences. Ultimately, Pariat's writing serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring possibility of connection and community, provided we approach cultural differences with an attitude of empathy and openness.

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