

The Issue Of Identity In The Context Of North East India: A Survey

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to present the readers with a reflection on the identity crisis in Northeast India through the readings of Bharati Mukherjee's works. The paper expresses the issues of rootlessness and identity crisis that the people of Northeast India face. The ethnic conflict in Northeast India has a long social and cultural root. Bharati Mukherjee has honestly portrayed the confused condition of her characters, as we find in Northeast India. The variety of identity crises in her works varies across social, political, psychosexual and psychosocial domains. The Identity crisis specifically felt in Northeast India will be studied through the lens of Bharati Mukherjee.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the issue of the identity crisis of the Northeast people, causing rootlessness and violence. The researchers try to address this problem of Identity through the readings of Bharati Mukherjee. Her works engage the themes of alienation, immigration, and homelessness. This familiar feeling of identity crisis is present in the Northeast people of our country as they are also displaced and disposed of. They cannot comprehend their new situation in the new setting as they are continuously asking themselves who they are and why they are here.

MOTIVATION

The study will highlight highly contemporaneous issues. They are:

- The Identity crisis felt in Northeast India.
- Understanding the condition of Northeast India through the lens of Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

Thus, the study will be established from a perspective different from the existing Literature.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The paper revolves around the following objectives, framing the study. They are the following.

1. To study the problem of Identity crisis in Northeast India.

While framing this paper, the authors will study the history of Northeast India to understand the region's contemporary socio-political scenario. The socio-political history of Northeast India will help the readers understand the region's vulnerable condition and crisis. This paper will illustrate the rudiments of identity crises and rootlessness already present in the people of the region.

2. To understand Northeast India, we have to study the literary contributions, and in this context we will introduce Bharati Mukherjee to find out whether she can throw light to understand Northeast India.

To understand the botched situation of the said region, the researcher will engage all the novels of Bharati Mukherjee to understand the condition of the region. Thus, her works will act as a lens to understand the identity problem of the Northeast people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We will study the social, political, and economic history of Northeast India to identify its identity crisis in detail.

The history of the Northeast people passes down from 'generation to generation' through dialect, tune and melodies, dance, customs, principles, and a wide array of chronicles, anecdotes, stories, and allegories. This constitutes the history of Northeast India. Thus, it is evident that Northeast India has had a colourful past since ancient times. This place has been populated since the period of Hiuen Tsang. Each people residing in the Northeast region have their own story of their past and politics. So, the history of this place needs to be communicated to the masses. Conventional Indian past treatise generally doesn't include the history of the North East, although the Ahom kingdom ruled this place for over six hundred years (Alam, 2023).

It was thought that Northeast India remained separated and away from the Mughals and did not have a pre-colonial past. A book (Nag, 2023) undoes the previous thoughts and stresses that Northeast India had a 'medieval' past and had a connection with the Mughals. Although the Northeast region was not an official member of the Mughal Empire, the Mughals had a great impact on the Northeastern states. Northeast produced trade and commerce, which connected it to India. As a result, there was a rise in the Muslim population in the region (Nag, 2023).

Another study tries to separate out the causes of the prolonged national and separatist rattles and the subsequent conditions that have soiled Northeast India. These struggles have been expounded using the wrong chronicle. However, such stories fail to describe the entire region's account (Hassan, 2008).

Northeast has been a disturbed region since the Independence of India. The reason for discontentment lies in the British imperialism. The works of this province remained ignored for several years as it was unreachable and found its manifestation through native dialects. However, the situation changed after the 1980's. The governmental turmoil in Assam caught the attention of the world (Kumar, 2014).

Northeast India now (officially North Eastern Region, NER) designates the easternmost region of the [Republic of India](#). It is also known as the "Land of Seven Sisters", comprising eight states—specifically Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim—is said to be the "Brother" to the seven states. It is sickly connected to the Indian mainland by a small strip—Siliguri Corridor (also known as Chicken Neck)—with a narrow width of only 23 kilometres. Guwahati is considered the "Gateway to the North-East". Northeast India has an extensive history and has undergone tremendous changes. The present Northeast India is totally different from what it was. There is no documentation of the social and cultural past of this area. Documentation of the proceedings of this region happened only in the British era. This place's folk tales, songs, myths, legends, rituals, festivals, and fairs are the only sources to search their roots. The region has references to the famous epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. In the British regime, this region came to be known as "North-East India". Earlier, the Northeast was ruled by different kingdoms dominated by various rulers. This extended successional rule of the Rajas in this region of India facilitated the security of this place for a long time from the attack of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals and the British till Burma conquered and founded its empire in Assam and Manipur. As a result, a war started between the Burmese and the British, becoming known as the Anglo-Burmese Wars. As the first war ceased in (1824-1826), the British conquered Assam and Manipur and signed a treaty named the 'Treaty of Yandabo' on 24 February 1826. After this event, the Britishers began invading various territories of this region to extend their rule, including the kingdom of Cachar—populated by the Kachari clan, the invasion of the Jaintia and Khasi hills, the capture of Assam finishing the Ahom kingdom, and lastly the invasion of the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills. At this time, North-East India was included in the Bengal province.

However, the indigenous habitat of this region did not lose faith and relentlessly confronted the British supremacy in India. In the 20th century, these revolutions merged with the national independence movement in the country. Northeast India performed an enormous role in the freedom struggle. Later in the 20th century, Northeast India was formed into different states. When India achieved its Independence in 1947, there were only three states—Assam, Manipur and Tripura. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland were under the jurisdiction of Assam. Assam was the first State to receive 'statehood' with the country's other states in 1947, followed by Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 and Mizoram in 1987.

Sikkim was added to the purview of Indian states in 1975 and united with other Northeastern states in 2002. The Northeastern states were designed based on ethnic and tribal identities (Government of India, 2024).

Northeast India has a long cultural history. The region has eight states, and each State is different regarding cuisine, dialect, and ethos. The Northeast region has been an electorally important and vulnerable region of India. Northeast India suffers from the threat of isolation from the rest of India; it is considered a hub of immigration, fanaticism and existentialism. Thus, there is an urgent need to keep the Identity of the Northeast safe so that they don't suffer from the fear of an 'existential crisis' (Ghosh, 2020).

The administration of Northeast India has been in the news in recent years. A recent study offers suggestions and considerations regarding gross negligence in studying the economic, cultural and demographic factors resulting in the faulty conception of policies and the effectiveness of organizations of authority in Northeast India (Singh 2008).

Neo-capitalist expansion of resource mining in Northeast India has produced a complex problem of identities, land independence, and conflict. The region is in constant news because of its insurgent activities. It is a state with the highest population of indigenous people in India, invoking conflicts. Despite being a core foundation for natural resources, the Northeast still lacks the basic facilities, which affects the sentiments of the area after so many years of Independence (TNI, 2021).

Manipur, a Northeast state, witnessed massive discontent between Meitei and Naga-Kuki groups, resulting in a significant breakdown of law and order. Indian army had been stationed to reinstate the status quo of the State. The condition of the State remains delicate even after the intervention of the ruling central government. Officials claim that the State's situation is improving (Mogul, 2023).

After the exploration of the socio-cultural, political, and economic history of Northeast India, a brief review of the literary history of Northeast India is studied with a focus on the problem of Identity.

Despite the formation of seven states, Northeast people are disappointed. Additional disintegration will result in the formation of various insignificant states. The present states are unsuccessful in fulfilling the fundamental necessities of the people. Corruption and the inequalities between the rich and the poor have worsened the situation of the State. It is obvious now that the methodologies and policies practised in the region must be re-evaluated (Madhab, 1999).

A recent book (Islam, 2022) exhibits the various literary traditions from Northeast India and their linkages and origins. It closely examines a collection of literary works of the writers and bards of this place and the subjugations of dialect, race and governance that have shaped their opinions. It discovers the existing critical methods of texts from the Northeast by re-investigating the idea of the centre, boundary, and locus standi of the subordinate's fictional opinions (Islam, 2022).

After studying the socio-political-economic and literary history of Northeast India to identify its identity crisis, we will try to understand whether the identity crisis of Northeast India could be explored with additional insights by studying Bharati Mukherjee. Before we go into our analysis of Bharati Mukherjee in the context of Northeast India, we must review the existing Literature on how Bharati Mukherjee is dealing with an identity crisis.

Bharati Mukherjee, the Writer of an Indian Diaspora, traverses the phenomena of rootlessness, nostalgia, alienation and cultural clash involving diverse cultures. The Writer's creative world notably manifests immigrant experience from third-world countries, facing countless hurdles before and after migrating to another land. "She is a virtuoso in the crafting of shrewd, suspenseful and significant cross-cultural dramas" - Dona Seaman, Booklist. The celebrated author illustrates the pain and suffering faced by women who migrate from their native land to a new land with a different culture. Bharati Mukherjee mixes her personal feelings with her novels' protagonists, creating a perfect blend and appetizer for the readers (Saranya, 2020).

Mukherjee's fiction overrides the question of nostalgia for a long-lost home, expatriation, disintegration, immigration, adaptation and cultural rendition and discussion. Mukherjee's sixth novel, *Desirable Daughters* (2002), sets a new drift in her writings. The novel used the extended range of history, geography, diaspora, gender, ethnicity, and language - rather than following the conventional tradition of diaspora (Bhaumik, 2014).

The issues of rootlessness, violence, and loneliness become obvious in Tara Banerjee in 'The Tiger's Daughter', Dimple in 'Wife', Jyothi in 'Jasmine' and Devi in 'Leave it to Me', three sisters-Padma, Parvathi and Tara in

'Desirable Daughters' and Tara in 'The Tree Bride'. Bharati Mukherjee's heroines are audacious and confident. They are born of iron metal, grounded on reality and agree with what life brings. (Aarthia A. and Lathab N. 2021) Bharati Mukherjee succeeded in establishing herself as a woman writer in the diaspora. Her focus on cosmopolitan aspects and her writings showcase India's present life, cultures, and different countries from the world map (Kumar, 2017).

Her novels try to inspect the various suggestions of diaspora on the protagonists' identity formation as females to know where they are suitable in the diaspora spectrum (Korao, 2016).

The portrayal of immigrants in the novels, their deep understanding of loneliness in the present situation, nostalgia and the problems of trying to connect two cultures are well represented in her novels (Sarkar, 2022).

The Writer's third novel, *Wife*, pens down the immigration experience through her position in Canada. The severe experience of racism is highlighted in the novel (Mason, 2021).

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

- The existing Literature related to Bharati Mukherjee's works contemplates immigration, the complexity of diaspora themes and globalization, but there is no literature that understands the question of the Identity of the Northeast people through the reading of this eminent Writer.
- Thus, this paper tries to connect Bharati Mukherjee's works with the turbulent condition of Northeast India relentlessly suffering from rootlessness and identity crisis.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study will use the theoretical framework of the Existentialist theory by Jean Paul Sartre to understand the deep-rooted identity crisis felt by the people of the region. As this paper tries to confer the readers with a reflection on the identity crisis in Northeast India through the readings of Bharati Mukherjee, the works of the late Writer will be closely and thematically read to write this paper.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Bharati Mukherjee is a known figure in the field of literary diaspora and has attained a desirable position in the literary world. As a postcolonial intellectual, Mukherjee concentrates on Indian history in her fictional and non-fictional works. Her subjects are mainly postcolonial Anglophone fiction, Asian American fiction, autobiographical narratives, memoirs, American culture, immigration history, reformation, and nationhood. The accuracy of her diasporic imagination hooks Mukherjee's originality. Mukherjee has unravelled various layers of diasporic awareness and immigrant understanding of displacements, rifts and repositioning of the migrant men/women in her fiction. Bharati Mukherjee has created a niche in penning down the immigration experience, 'acculturation in the modern multi-culturalism world' (Geetha, 2019), the status of the immigrants, and the feeling of isolation and alienation of the expatriates. Bharati Mukherjee judiciously unravels the identity crisis issue in her fiction and non-fiction works. Her characters relentlessly question who they are and where their roots are. She is a genius in Anglophone fiction, Asian American culture, and immigration history. The author's subjects revolve around the 'Oriental and Occidental Culture' (Geetha 2019). In her novels *Desirable Daughters* and *Tree Bride*, the Writer tries to search for their roots and gives an excellent picture of their earlier life.

'I am free to make a mess of my own life' (*Desirable Daughters*, pg. 48).

'Daddy, I have found a boy and have fallen in love. Parvati, the middle daughter had done the unthinkable: she'd made a love match.' (*Desirable Daughters*, pg. 50-51) These lines speak a lot about the lives of the women characters in her novels. It speaks of individual freedom and voicing one's demands.

Desirable Daughters studies how to live in two different cultures. The novel's plot revolves around three sisters, born in Calcutta and raised in a conventional Bengali Brahmin family. The protagonist of the novels *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride*, Tara Chatterjee, embarks on a venture to return to her roots, India, where she was born and brought up. The notion of search may signify one of the "most American impulses"- 'a root search' (*Desirable Daughters*, pg.17). This search for roots is also evident in Northeast India, where people continuously seek the answer to who they are and where they came from.

Mukherjee's heroines in the novel can adapt themselves both to conventional Indian life and to their newly hyphenated existence. They constantly move forward and backwards between two lives: 'maybe I was between

two lives'(Desirable Daughters, pg.251). This State of Bharati Mukherjee's character can be compared to Northeast people who continuously try to adapt, assimilate and evolve in the newly found culture. 'Calcutta girls of our social set who attended convent schools and aspired to successful marriages with foreign residence were never taken to desi Hindi movies. We read film magazines about the Bombay stars' outrageous sex lives and criminal activities'(Desirable Daughters, pg. 113).

Tara's 'family's "westernization" was superficial, confined to convent school, metro cinema, and movie magazines, which overlaid a profound and orthodox Hinduism. Brahmos were scary to us; their knowledge of western classics was thorough, their Bengali proud and chaste, their Hinduism ruthlessly reformist' (Desirable Daughters, pg.178). Thus, we find that the characters are caught in between the spheres. The novelist mentions in her novels that her characters are trying hard to fit into the new atmosphere, but they are facing enormous shocks and conflicts that raise questions among themselves. Northeast India also had a beautiful historical past, but it is now infested with unnecessary violence, making it trapped and suffer from anxiety and existential crisis. The protagonist, Tara, said that 'girls of good family' (Desirable Daughters, pg.133), had been 'condemned' for going through 'divorce' and had become an 'American' (Desirable Daughters, pg.134).

A sequence of displacement discords traverses the third space produced, and the place becomes a text of the 'originary' (Bhabha, pg. 210) into an 'ambivalent' (Bhabha, pg. 211) identity. With her weird awareness of the cross-cultural predicament in the epoch of globalization, Bharati Mukherjee undertook to plunge abysmal into such slippage of the immigrants living in the clash of archaic Indian values intrinsic in their nature. The displaced immigrants and their interest in the Western style of living that they had chosen out of their obligations or for their desire to achieve greater freedom in the liberal and dynamic society of America is also an area of Mukherjee's interest. Mukherjee's narratives, the two geographical individuals, the home and the setting, narrated aid and replicate each other. Her fiction narrates the homeland in detail with all subjectivity. Her characters are forced to follow traditional stupidity and experience the societal dislocation conveyed through mixed identity codes. Tara herself declares her family as 'hybrid' (The Tree Bride 45) ', orthodox Hindu, Bengali-speaking, cricket-loving, Shakespeare-acting, Gilbert and Sullivan-singing, adaptable-anywhere brahmins' but 'after leaving Calcutta convent-school' 'returned to a world of tales, prayers, and a shadow universe of myth and legend' (Tree Bride, pg.43).

The novel *Tree Bride* is a search for the roots. It tries to connect the present and the past events in Tara's life. Their fortunes appear to amalgamate, again reproducing a story of a Tree-Bride. "I have waited half a century to be liberated" (Tree Bride, pg.281), "Your son is there, he can perform my rites. Please! He can send me on my way to the Abode of Ancestors. I am ready for the journey"(Tree bride, pg. 281). Thus, Taralata is urging for emancipation from her namesake. This statement may be interpreted as Taralata's urge for freedom, as we find in the Northeast.

Mukherjee's novel *Wife* (1975) is a story of an immigrant in the United States, culminating from marriage and resulting in a complete physical and mental breakdown. Her madness drives her to murder her husband. "Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slimming its doors in my face. I want to live!" (Wife, pg.11) The novel is an example of how deep inner conflicts can produce violence, as we find in Northeast India. The novel is an excellent projection of the dynamics of the psyche.

The novel *Jasmine* (1989) is set on the themes of cultural conflict and the search for Identity. "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Jasmine, pg. 29). There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Jasmine, pg. 29).

The *Tiger's Daughter* (1971), Mukherjee's first novel, also claims the shock and cultural conflicts in the protagonist's minds as we find in other novels. The novel is also again a longing for the past.

Mukherjee's expression of intense, sensitive feelings about the immigrant experience and her representation of xenophobia, homesickness, and dislocation won her international fame. She realized the crisis personally so she could write it down wonderfully in her works. The paper seeks to understand the crisis of Northeast India through the rootlessness and violence of the area through the columns of Bharati Mukherjee. Her works act as a looking glass to reflect the secure situation of the region. The opening phrase of *Jasmine*, a novel by Bharati Mukherjee, is

"Lifetime ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears- his satellite dish to the stars and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous- armed from leaves and thorns "I am tornado[...] How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, and how many more husbands" (Jasmine,pg.215). Bharati Mukherjee, the Indo-Canadian and American Writer echoes in her works the State of banishment, the feeling of loss, the agony of detachment and the perplexity marking Bharati Mukherjee's novel, Jasmine, a search for the "roots" and Identity.

The study seeks to understand Northeast India's deep-rooted problems by reading Bharati Mukherjee's novels. Salman Rushdie, the Writer of *Satanic Verses*, said in *Imaginary Homelands*, "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie, pg. 10).

Bharati Mukherjee's works emphasize migration, their position as new immigrants and their experience in their new homelands. Throughout her life, she battled with Identity, and this steered her to assess herself as a migrant in a country of settlers. "In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all to learn... Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful that it won't disintegrate. The interstitial space is fluid, uncertain and temporary and must be since it is 'in between' the stable poles of traditional temporal and spatial progressions. Jasmine exists within this liminal condition and she describes the sensation as akin to being...suspended between worlds"(Jasmine, pg. 112).

Bharati Mukherjee says that the course of evolution in the new worlds is accompanied by disgrace and a clash of beliefs. "Need I say that I am desperate, almost suicidal? I see life slimming its doors in my face, I want to live" (Wife, pg.11). Again, these lines represent alienation and crisis in Mukherjee's fictional world. "Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between American Culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing" (Wife, pg. 42).

This quotation from this novel speaks of the trapped situation that we find in Northeast India. "The stale curry smelled offensively of garlic. It made her feel trapped, isolated in a high rise full of Americans who ate hamburgers and Pizzas" (Wife, pg. 119). C.C Mishra argues that: "In such a situation where the individual is seen as geographically, culturally, linguistically or sometimes psychologically estranged, the whole question of individual's identity becomes an unattainable ideal" (Mishra, pg.8). Thus, the quest for Identity and the search for roots are omnipresent in Mukherjee's novels as we find similar traits in the Northeast people of our country. Tara unveils her ancestral search, "... I finally yielded to that most American of impulses or compulsions, a "roots search" (Desirable Daughters, pg. 17).

CONCLUSION

This research work tries to comprehend the unstable situation of Northeast India. People of Northeast India are really confused about their existence. Girish Karnad's play *Hayavadana* is a classic example to elucidate the condition of the Northeast people. Just like the play *Hayavadana*, the bodies of the Northeast people belong to India, but their heads do not confer to the mainland of India. They wish to remain in their previous status. The works of Bharati Mukherjee will help us understand this identity crisis in the region of Northeast India. Her works will act as a viewfinder for the researchers.

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