

Sense of Alienation and Separatism in Northeast India: A Poignant Reflection on the Human Conditions in the Selected Novels

¹ Karthiyayini S, ² Dr. B. Pavithra,

¹PhD Scholar, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, India

Email - ¹karthiyayiniselvaraj1998@gmail.com, ²drpavithrapsgcas@gmail.com,

Abstract: This research investigates the intersections of space, identity, and power in the socio-political landscape of Assam, using Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* as central literary texts. While tracing these narratives of lives across the contours of insurgency, the study has unfolded as to how various pressures across the outside world work on them, and such multifarious complexities are a fact of human identity formation across insurgency movements and separatist elements. Using Michel Foucault's heterotopia and Victor Turner's liminality, this research explores how characters such as Rukmini and Jongom move through contested spaces of power and belonging, themselves transforming through various processes of internal conflict and social upheaval. That this tension between loyalty to the colonial husband and nationalist sympathies in Rukmini and disillusionment with separatist violence in Jongom reflects how spaces, whether physical or symbolic, structure their identities and allegiances points out that the study also foregrounds the resilience of the human spirit in Assam's fractured, contested landscape amidst socio-political turbulence.

Key Words: alienation, separatism, identity conflict, political ideologies, social turmoil.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The socio-political landscape of Assam, a region in India's Northeast, has long been characterised by conflict and insurgency, where questions of identity, autonomy, and power continue to shape the lived experiences of its people. As it has been marked by decades of ethnic conflict, separatist movements, and governmental brutality, the region always offers a complicated story of contested spaces where the political and the personal are blurred. These contested spaces are not merely geographical but ones of social and psychological dimensions, transforming day-to-day experience and indeed the sense of belonging among its inhabitants. This study therefore examines how these intersections between space, identity, and power manifest in Assam, as reflected in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma*.

Some of the elements that have contributed to the socio-political turmoil in Assam include the fight for the resources, ethnic conflicts, and aspirations for increased autonomy. These have handed the region's socio-cultural fabric to various insurgency movements that oriented more to the desire for self-determination. The state's response to insurgency—frequently marked by military interventions, curfews, and surveillance—contributes to further externalisation of everyday life experience by the people, adding another layer of control upon both public and private spaces (Libman and Davidzon). Through such a lens, literature becomes an important route that makes it possible to examine the fragments in people's lived realities. Both Phukan and Hazarika do not just graphically depict the physical facts of conflicts but also explore psychological outcomes for its human inhabitants. Their works represent the human cost of violence, showing how insurgency shapes not just the landscapes but identities and emotional worlds.

Assam's distinct ethnic diversity and historical migratory heritage are other features that define its sociocultural past and have shaped its complicated sense of identity. Diverse groups shifting in have led to the composition of a multifaceted cultural mosaic, in which the notion of belonging is constantly negotiated. However, this diversity has also been a source of tension, as has been evident in the history of ethnic clashes and demands for ethnolinguistic recognition

in the region (Gogoi). This background adds a particular significance to the study of how spatial practices in Assam are affected by insurgency and how they impact identity formation. It is in these dynamics of socio-political realities that everyday life in the region takes shape, at the juncture of historical grievance and contemporary struggles for autonomy (Gogoi).

The choice to focus on Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma* and Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is especially pertinent because both books shed light on the human condition in the conflict-ridden region of Assam. The characters in these novels navigate their realities against the backdrop of ongoing violence, reflecting a shared experience of negotiating space in the region where the boundaries between safe and unsafe, the familiar and the unfamiliar, are continuously blurred, which is the main focus in this research. The narratives not only capture the palpable sense of tension in everyday life but also highlight the resilience and agency of individuals who seek to assert their identities amid the turmoil. These literary texts would therefore provide a rich ground for the exploration of how socio-political forces shape lived experiences in the people of Assam, while also considering the possibility of resistance and transformation.

This study employs Victor Turner's theory of liminality to analyse the experiences of Rukmini and Jongom within the contested spaces of Assam. In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault elucidates the heterotopia as "other" spaces, but real sites within society that are simultaneously reflective and critical of the social order. In *The Collector's Wife*, Rukmini moves through a colonial household that forms a heterotopic space whereby the convergence of colonial authority with that of domesticity results in a space that is both privileged and oppressive both in terms of nature and a microcosm of the larger structure of colonial power. This heterotopic space unravels the effects of colonial power on personal relationships and how life in such a space creates inner conflicts. In the *Sons of Brahma*, Jongom encounters different heterotopic spaces that he encounters in insurgent hideouts and government offices that depict different conditions of power and rules. The complexity of control and resistance interplay is reflected in these spaces and forces the characters to confront their beliefs and values.

The exploration of identity and belonging in these novels thus illuminates how external forces influence individual lives within a politically fractured landscape. The heterotopic and liminal spaces depicted in *The Collector's Wife* and *Sons of Brahma* serve not merely as backdrops, but as active forces shaping the characters' choices and beliefs. Rukmini's conflict between her colonial affiliations and nationalist sympathies, and Jongom's disillusionment with the separatist movement, exemplify the ways in which socio-political turmoil permeates personal relationships and identities.

These liminal spaces and identities that feature in these novels have a rich meaning through the theory of liminality advanced by Victor Turner. It identifies these spaces and identities, which are transitional, through its definition of liminality as the state of being "in-between." It's a transitional period when people or groups are outside the normative order. Rukmini's liminal position is that of a colonial officer's wife, caught between pledging allegiance to the husband and sympathy with the Assamese nationalist movement. She finds her colonial home a place that is liminal as well, questioning her loyalty to the husband. These are changes in society challenging deeper power. Jongom similarly is located in a transitional space as he too tries to carve out his identity on a contested political terrain when he sojourns within Assam's landscape of insurgency. His activities at these transitory locations suggest the vagueness and fluidity of power wherein the subjects work out their identities over conflicting loyalties.

In these novels, it is then possible to highlight how forces outside the individual's life impinge upon the latter, within a fractured political landscape. The heterotopic and liminal spaces within *The Collector's Wife* and *Sons of Brahma*, respectively, are not merely backdrops but an active force determining choice and belief in characters' lives. Rukmini's tension between colonial loyalties and nationalist affections, Jongom's bitterness toward the separatist movement, are some illustrations of how socio-political upheaval infuses personal relationships and identities. The current study therefore opens up the experiences of people during conflicts, and elucidate the potential a novel can carry in delineating the contours of space and identity with power relations at play. It is interesting, therefore, that such instances of disruption of spaces depicted in the novels also show the social and political implications of Assam at certain points but also presents options for possible alternatives.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Understanding the history of Assam is crucial before beginning any research. Assam, a state in northeastern India, has a complex history of socio-political turmoil and insurgency. The region has been a hotbed of ethnic tensions,

identity politics, and separatist movements for decades (Pan and Xiao 2023). One of the major factors contributing to the unrest in Assam is the issue of illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh, which has led to demographic changes and competition over resources (AbuSara and Abubaker 2022).

The insurgency in Assam dates back to the 1980s when the Assam Movement, led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU), demanded the detection and deportation of illegal immigrants (Nath 2021). This movement eventually led to the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which aimed to address the grievances of the Assamese people and provide safeguards for the indigenous communities (Biswas 2020). However, despite the Assam Accord, insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) continued to wage a violent struggle for an independent Assam (Gogoi 2021). The conflict between the Indian government and various insurgent groups has resulted in widespread violence, human rights abuses, and displacement of populations in the region.

The historical context of Assam during the time periods depicted in Mitra Phukan's *"The Collector's Wife"* and Dhruba Hazarikha's *"Sons of Brahma"* is crucial for understanding the characters' choices, beliefs, and relationships within the narratives. Assam has a rich and complex history, and the socio-political turmoil and insurgency during these periods deeply influenced the lived spaces of its inhabitants, which is the motive of this research.

3. POLITICAL UNREST IN *THE COLLECTOR'S WIFE* AND *SONS OF BRAHMA*:

In Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Dhruba Hazarikha's *Sons of Brahma* the characters find themselves entangled in the intricate web of identity and belonging against the tumultuous backdrop of socio-political upheaval (He et al. 2016). As they navigate through the complexities of their personal journeys, they grapple with profound questions of self-discovery and societal transformation (Jorgenson 2023).

The Collector's Wife delves into the life of Rukmini, the wife of a district collector in Assam during the turbulent years of insurgency. Rukmini finds herself torn between her allegiance to her husband and her growing sympathy for the nationalist movement sweeping through the region (Ichijo and Ranta 2002). As she witnesses the injustices perpetrated by the colonial regime, Rukmini is forced to confront her own complicity in perpetuating the status quo. Her journey towards self-discovery is intricately linked to her struggle to reconcile her identity as a privileged wife with her desire for social justice and equality.

Similarly, in *Sons of Brahma* by Dhruba Hazarikha, the characters are thrust into the midst of the Assamese separatist movement that shook the region in the 1980s. Against the backdrop of political turmoil and ethnic conflict, they grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and allegiance. At the heart of the novel lies the story of Jongom, a young man caught between his loyalty to his family and his yearning for a greater sense of purpose. As he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the violence and extremism of the separatist movement, Jongom embarks on a quest for self-discovery, searching for a path that aligns with his values and beliefs.

The theme of identity is particularly salient in both novels, as the characters grapple with the multifaceted layers of their personal and collective identities. Rukmini's journey in *The Collector's Wife* reflects the internal conflict faced by many subjects torn between their allegiance to the insurgents and their sense of national pride and identity. Similarly, Jongom's struggle in *Sons of Brahma* mirrors the broader tensions within Assamese society, torn apart by ethnic divisions and competing visions of nationhood.

'Belonging', too, emerges as a central theme in both novels, as the characters seek to find their place in a world torn apart by conflict and division. Rukmini's quest for belonging is complicated by her status as an outsider in colonial Assam (K. Phukan 2015), while Jongom grapples with his sense of belonging within the fractured landscape of Assamese society. Their journeys highlight the universal human longing for connection and community, even in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. Ultimately, both *The Collector's Wife* and *Sons of Brahma* offer powerful explorations of the complexities of identity, belonging, and the quest for self-discovery within the backdrop of socio-political turmoil. Through the lives of Rukmini, Jongom, and other characters, we gain insight into the profound impact of external forces on individual lives, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. As they navigate through the maelstrom of history, the characters remind us of the enduring power of the human quest for meaning and purpose, even in the darkest of times.

4. Liminal Spaces and Separatist Sentiments: Analysing Transnational Identities in Assamese Literature:

Transnational spaces are defined by Victor Turner's idea of liminality as periods in which people or groups find themselves in between social institutions that have long been in place (Kligyte et al. 2022). Understanding the transforming experiences and emerging identities during times of change requires an awareness of these "in-between" places, which are neither here nor there. Turner's theory offers a sophisticated framework for analysing the separatist feelings and identity conflicts portrayed in selected novels.

Turner's concept of liminality is evident in the spatial and psychological landscapes of the characters. In *The Collector's Wife*, Rukmini's experiences encapsulate the liminal state. As the wife of a British colonial officer, she occupies a transnational space caught between the colonial authority and the rising nationalist fervour. Her home, a colonial establishment, is a liminal space where the boundaries between the coloniser and the colonised blur, reflecting her internal conflict and growing disillusionment. This in-betweenness challenges her sense of belonging, making her journey one of self-discovery and transformation. The liminal space she inhabits becomes a crucible for examining the emerging nationalist identity against the backdrop of a decaying colonial regime.

In *Sons of Brahma*, the liminality is manifest in the characters' navigation through Assam's volatile socio-political landscape (Waterman 2022). Jongom, a young man caught between his loyalty to his family and the allure of the separatist movement, embodies the liminal figure. His journey through insurgent hideouts, contested territories, and communal spaces symbolises the transitional nature of his identity. These spaces are neither fully controlled by the state nor by the insurgents, reflecting the ambiguous and fluid nature of power and belonging in times of conflict. Turner's liminality helps in understanding Jongom's struggle as he seeks to define his identity within these transnational and transitional spaces, highlighting the tension between individual aspirations and collective political ideologies.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the research highlights the significance of identity, belonging, and self-discovery in the context of Assam's socio-political turmoil. By examining the characters' experiences in *The Collector's Wife* and *Sons of Brahma*, the research illuminates the complexities of human existence amidst the backdrop of conflict and upheaval. It offers valuable insights into the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity and the enduring quest for meaning and identity within a fractured society.

REFERENCES :

1. AbuSara, A. K., and M. Abubaker. "The Relationship between Illegal Immigration and Human Trafficking in Light of International Conventions and Jordanian Legislation." *Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan Journal for Legal Studies*, 2022.
2. Biswas, D. *The Impasse of Khilonjia Identity Assam: The Accord, The Discord, By Sangeeta*. 2020.
3. Gogoi, N. *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency Operations: Conflicts Between the United Liberation Front of Asom and the State*. 2021.
4. He, Kaiming, et al. "Identity Mappings in Deep Residual Networks." *arXiv.org*, 25 July 2016, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1603.05027>.
5. Ichijo, Atsuko, and Ronald Ranta. *Food, National Identity and Nationalism from Everyday to Global Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
6. Jorgensen, Paul A. *Lear's Self-Discovery*. University of California Press, 2021.
7. Kligyte, Giedre, et al. "Re-Imagining Transdisciplinary Education Work Through Liminality: Creative Third Space in Liminal Times." *Australian Educational Researcher*, 2022, pp. 617-634.
8. Nath, Monoj. *Assam Movement and Communal Polarisation*. 2021.
9. Pan, Yajie and Qing Xiao. "Separatist Movements Influenced by International Intervention: The Case of West Papua." 2023.
10. Phukan, K. "Social Realism in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and in Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories*." *SSRN*, 19 Oct. 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3683130.
11. Waterman, Anna. "The Shadow of 'The Boys': Rebel Governance Without Territorial Control in Assam's ULFA Insurgency." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 34, 2022, pp. 279-304.