

**ENCAPSULATING THE SOUL OF THE NORTH-EAST: FAITH
OF THE PAST AND THE ANGST OF THE PRESENT**

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Abstract

This paper explores the north-eastern region—its cultural, historical and mystical domains through the short stories of Janice Pariat, a young writer from the hilly terrains of Meghalaya. The paper explores the north eastern way of life in the background of various historical and political events that have disturbed the placid mountains and its peace-loving people. The paper has also tried to throw light on the loss of the girdle of faith and the entry of suspicion among its people causing untold misery to communities and groups that have been rendered rootless in their own land. Pariat's portrayal of the hilly domain, unfolding the growth of insurgency, the natives' sense of loss of their resources as well as culture, the settlers' agony in being reduced to the state of strangers, have all been highlighted and shown how understanding communities and people help in reducing frictions and violence. This paper reveals an outsider's understanding of the spirit of the mountains of Meghalaya through the eyes of an insider. It also tries to emphasise on the fact that the history of a land is revealed through the stories told by ordinary people and not by the elite methodologies of history.

Key Words- Aura of the hills-Insurgency-Magic Realism-Angst of the Present-Loss of Faith-First Citizens- the Other-Khasi way of life- Mystic spells-Modernity and Tradition.

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The term citizen appears in two different senses. The first is that of the bearer of the legal rights to residence, political participation, state support and protection. The second sense is this more diffuse sense of acceptance in, and acceptance of, an existing order and existing social arrangements (Pandey 4736).

In the background of increasing demands for separate states based on ethnicities and the reported cases of violence against the 'other', the time for an immediate understanding of communities and groups which have remained invisible on the front yards of the national social and political structures, has arrived. India has witnessed a sudden entry of a huge mass of people from the invisible fringes of the society into the mainstream claiming their spaces and rights. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism seem to crumble under the violent force of theories of the natives' lost opportunities and deprived conditions. The genuine demands of the natives have been lost in the engulfing violence, and only a sense of loss and angst pervades the atmosphere. The natives' agitations have the flames of frustration, having been denied their rights over their resources for centuries whereas; the settlers' experience of alienation and rootlessness is a frightening one. The girdle of faith surrounding the beautiful and tranquil lands of the North-East is being violently snatched and a wave of suspicion and fear has swept over the entire land. Compared to the modern ways of the world, the old superstitious, but faithful world that related to everything around it, even the lifeless things seems better. The turbulent North-East presents itself in a violent way and the violence unleashed on the common man, women and the vulnerable groups by the separatists, the army and the opportunist external forces has ravaged the soul of the North-East.

In order to reduce the tension and friction, the need of understanding communities and groups which we hold in contempt or fear is essential. Literature plays a significant role in creating permeability among communities. Documenting the lives of people, their beliefs and emotions is vital for creating inroads into their psyche. This responsibility can be efficiently managed by the representatives of the communities who have eyes for details, sense of the past, the needs of the present and a sense of pride in their nativity which is not tampered with parochialism and fanaticism. Janice Pariat has done an exceptional job in capturing the soul of the strife-ridden hills of Meghalaya in her collection of short stories *Boats on Land*. Set between the hills and plains of Shillong, Cherrapunji and Assam, her stories capture the transformations that swept through the North-east during a period of three centuries. Pariat is successful in catching the mystery that breathes behind the landscape of the hills. Her style has been linked to magic realism as well as to the writings of Haruki Murakami of Japan who expressed the alienation and loneliness experienced by the modern man. She employs the means of telepathy, telekinesis, and levitation in order to encompass the phantasmagorical and the super natural within the realistic framework. She fuses multiple planes of reality such as urban and rural, western and indigenous and tradition and modernity, together.

Men and women across India have told the stories of their lands and people over the centuries and have passed on these stories to the younger generations without the aid of any of the modern historical tools of documentation. It is rightly said that the history of a civilization is a bouquet of stories of individuals, stories of ordinary men and women. As Rushdie rightly observes,

To grow up steeped in these tellings was to learn two unforgettable lessons: first, that stories were not true (there were no 'real' genies in bottles or flying carpets or wonderful lamps), but by being untrue they could make him feel and know truths that the truth could not tell him; and the second, that they all belonged to him, just as they belonged to his

father...Man was the story telling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was(Rushdie 19).

All historical factors which affected the North-East, the colonial impact, the conversions, their retreat, the confusing ideas of nationalism, agitations against the outsiders, creation of new states and territories, impact of communism and the factors of globalization that drove the young into the highways of the new cities have been captured vividly. The land portrayed by Pariat has a sense of mystery and awe, infused with supernatural elements and rich folktales. Age-old superstitions reflecting deep faith in everything around are interleaved with political agitations and social turmoil. The two opposite worlds, the one infused with bewitching water fairies, men transforming into tigers, wild dreams coming true and the other, teeming with the frustrated men attacking everyone around, shifting of families and people from their homelands of centuries, young men wasting away their energy on modern vices, young men and women searching for their identities and lost relations, lost in the bitter struggles, leading to an aimless and purposeless existence, have been captured alive. The narrative mode of Pariat is captivating as well as suggestive. The rich flavours of the local language, the minute details of the landscape, localities give authenticity to the narrative pattern. The aura of mystery powerfully built in one story, gets shattered immediately in the other by an account of the existential miseries surrounding everyone. The search of a young woman for her lost childhood friend who lived in the Assam Cottage is not just an individual case of loss but signifies the search for identity of an entire community. It also signifies the loss of human ties and harmony. Pariat talks about the unfathomable power of the oral and the native vitality that echoes in every story told by the fireside. She expresses the limited nature of written word which feebly translates the spirit of the soil,

Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally. Spoken, Unwritten, Unrecorded. Old,

they say, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the heath, and fall as rain. We, who had no letters with which to etch our history, have married our words to music, to mantras, that we repeat until lines grow old and wither and fade away. Until they are forgotten and there is silence (Pariat 4).

The virgin land of the hills with its sleepy population first encounters the colonial entry and the occupiers' portrayal is unbiased with incidents of natural human kindness and blissful love flowing across barriers and beyond language differences. The power of the word suggesting the mysterious nature of the tribes is wonderfully depicted with the readers left with lot to ponder about. The faith of the tribes in the power of the word is written about in such a way that a disbeliever also temporarily suspends his disbelief. A tribal woman, who works in the bungalow of the Whites, explains the power of the word as follows:

The memsahib says she would like to teach me to read and write, with something called "alphabet" that her husband had invented for our language. I explained to her that we have no need for these things—books, and letters, and writing- and that everything we know is in the sound of our words, *kiktien*. It has the power to do good...' (Pariat 12)

With the entry of the British, the war that had affected the world casts its shadow on the hills. The primitive silence gets broken by the drones of the airplanes and Christianity's spell over the hills is acknowledged with the presence of missionaries and converted hill men working as doctors, distributing medicines and clothes donated by the Welsh missionaries. Simultaneously, the unvanquished presence of the spirit of the beliefs of the land is also affirmed. The strange dreams of the girl about the fire bird and *Kyantang's* (the local horse keeping boy) belief in it, and the strange association of the white girl with an ordinary boy of the hills is definitely not another *Pocahontas* story but something subtler than that. Most of the stories present the two different societies placed against one another despite being closer in

so many unexplainable ways. Sahib Sam and Haphida, Lucy and Kyantang communicate across barriers but get separated under unavoidable circumstances. 'It is always the question of a half and half, little bastards running around with blue eyes and white skin' (Pariat 9). Barisha's search for Vivek Hazarika from the Assam Cottage also depicts the simple love that hovers around, unmindful of the barriers of the local-outsider theories and the separation of communities that force people to forget their memories and move ahead.

Ezra, a perfect Youngman, an all-rounder, the boy who had moved to Delhi and had trained in one of the finest flying schools abroad returns to the hills and one fine morning, vanishes only to be found dead at the bottom of the deep cliffs covered with mist. Ezra was disturbed by the death of his childhood Christian friend Vincent who died in Bombay. Vincent was not a *Khasi* but wanted to be cremated just like a *Khasi*. It was speculated that Ezra had committed suicide though there were no strong reasons to have taken such a step. The mysterious ways of the hills create an aura of magical effect and the human misery that unfolds urges one to return to the mysterious hills just as Ezra does. The hills have an effect to magnify any sort of feelings and the landscape always casts its spell over its inhabitants. The mysterious disappearance of the French woman, Kasa's father's assumed transformation into a tiger, Ezra's fall from the cliffs, the death of the twins in the river, the spell of the magic word on the horses and the ensuing tragedy create an atmosphere of gloom but the feeling of the land consuming everything around and the power of nature to lure men into its folds is strongly felt.

The settlers who had completely embraced the ways of the hills had no place to go when the hills expressed their inability to hold them securely in their laps. Deaths and parting of ways are powerfully narrated and the sense of loss is deep and painful. Every one leaves searching for something that is never found. The settlers leave searching for safe and secure places, the young try their luck on the plains, abroad and the old wait at home for the young ones to return. The journey brings agony to all. It is the pain of being disturbed. The communities who refused to disturb even the primitive silence

of the forests are forced to witness the mass exodus of their neighbors and children. The concept of the ethnic and the native confuses the all embracing culture of the old world but their ethnicity and political awareness of their plight prevents them from practicing the same and the conflict torments them the most. As Joseph Eliza points out,

Ethnicity lies at the core of all processes of group identity. All human beings and groups of human make an active self-conscious attempt to construct definitions of who they are as “people” draw select symbols from their cultures to create ethnic identity system. Ethnicity therefore is composition of historically derived symbols as vehicle of conceptualizing ethnic identity (Joseph 306)

The changing landscape of Shillong with its mesmerizing waterfalls and sleepy roads giving way to curfew-emptied roads, evening blackouts and burning of settlers’ colonies is painfully communicated. The presence of the KSU, the HNLC, and the CRPF torments different groups in different ways. Most of the young people are either occupied in chasing the *dkars* out or just hang out with no definite purpose in life. The constant shoot-outs of the innocent on the roads, the ralleys that often turned violent, perpetually shut schools and colleges and endless *bandhshad* left the youth totally disturbed. They partied and made love as if the world was going to end the next day. The agitations had lost their purpose with increased demands of extortion forcing many families selling their business and leaving Shillong for safer places. The music of the youth expresses their rage and there is very little security around. Parita expresses the pain of the hilly communities as ‘Unlike the hills and mist, for us freedom doesn’t last a lifetime; it comes and goes on unexpected afternoons’ (Parita 141).

The story 19/87 unveils the settlers’ agony and depicts their terror filled lives, the agony of seeing neighbours leaving the place and the fear of being left alone. “It is getting dangerous in Shillong” is the common refrain heard often. The natives were frustrated with the outsiders’ rule during which

they had lost their jobs, resources and women. Their frustration knew no bounds and whoever came on the way were targeted—the Nepalis in 79, the Bengalis in 81, then the *Marwaris*. Every community that was called the *dkhar* feared an attack. Suleiman the tailor stays put in Shillong but observes the cluster of Muslim families getting smaller and smaller. He no more dares to visit the houses of his clients. His plight is miserable. He dares not flying his kite freely.

Often at night, though, there were stones thrown on his roof, shouts resounding the street—“*Dkharliah, mihnaShillong*”. You bastard outsider, get out of Shillong. These were the things thought Suleiman, that weren’t reported in newspapers (Pariat 101)

The native youths are equally confused and KumnoDorji, a *Khasi* youth, reveals his frustration hidden under his arrogant overt expressions. He lies bare his confused feelings. He is forced to show his loyalty to the tribe by attacking the *dkhars* but he has the responsibility of taking care of his family but he has no property of his own or a job to rely on. He too wants to leave Shillong but has no place to go. Many leave the place searching greener pastures but the busy roads of the cosmopolitan cities steal their identities or refuse to accept them as their own. The call of the hills is too powerful to resist but the hills are no longer the happy places that once were. Suleiman’s bitterness is all about being called an outsider by young *Khasi* boys who were not even born when he was born in Shillong. He did not know any other place to be called his own and the most beautiful place that had accepted him as its own had turned into a land of unfathomable rage and hatred. The anti-dkhar feelings had consumed the children also *In Secret Corridors* the feelings of alienation and segregation is poignantly depicted. When Doreen talks of kicking all *Marwaris* out of Shillong, Natalie remains quiet even though she finds the thought disgusting. She played with Assamese girls in the evenings and never harboured any ill-feelings towards them. But she hated to be called an *ied-dkhar*. A *dkhar* lover.

In the short story *Boats on Land* an Assamese family's plight being caught in the whirlpool of the *Khasi* movement is exceptionally described. The Hazarikas had to leave their hometown, witness the death of an important member of the family. The young daughter of the family gets permanently affected by the tragedy. The father shares his pain with his friend by letting out his anguish,

One evening Mamuni was coming back from the market, and this *Khasi* guy stopped her and slapped her, in the middle of the road... I remember when she got home and told me, I was angry, but she only seemed surprised that he'd called her an outsider. She kept saying "I have lived here all my life" (Pariat 187).

Every story depicts the angst of the younger generation pitted against the deep faith of the old world. Kasa who shoots birds fully believing that it is mercy that is sought, Mama Kyn who gets attracted fatally to the river falls, the anthropologist from France who enquires about the strange practice of the *theln and nongshohnoh*, the blood money given to kill a person, all have deep faith in what they do and have no conflicts in their minds about the purpose of life. Modernity brings in awareness and new ideas, leading only to bitter conflicts and sense of despair. The angst of modernity deeply pervades the story narration and the agony of the hill tribes caught between the tranquil past and the tormenting present is brought out in various hues. Finally the revelation comes through the words of an elderly gentleman who comforts Barisha gone in search of her Assamese childhood friend Vivek Hazarika, 'I was saying that the past is sometimes better left alone. People move on. They must'. Everyone is on a sort of pilgrimage and pilgrimages are for remembering people and places left behind (Pariat 177).

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