# INTERROGATING IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF THE FICTIONAL NARRATIVES OF JANICE PARIAT

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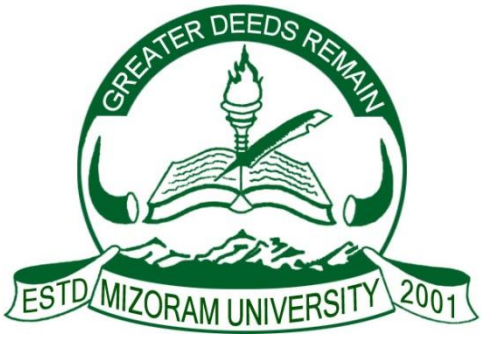


**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURE STUDIES**
**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND LANGUAGES**
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# Interrogating Identities:

# A Study of the Fictional Narratives of Janice Pariat

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled *Interrogating Identities: A Study of the Fictional Narratives of Janice Pariat* submitted to Mizoram University by Dustin Lalkulhpuia in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies is purely an original research work accomplished by the scholar under my direct supervision and neither the thesis nor any part of it has so far been submitted to any educational institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I am, therefore, glad to recommend in all fairness that this dissertation be sent to the examiner(s) for an expeditious evaluation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Culture Studies.

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I **DUSTIN LALKULHPUIA**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

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Dated: (DUSTIN LALKULHPUIA)

Place: Aizawl, Mizoram

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, scholars across diverse academic disciplines have embarked upon an intellectual endeavour that may be aptly designated as the politics of identity. Their scholarly inquiries encompass and extend beyond the progressive critiques of essentialism within the realms of ethnic, sexual, national, and racial identities, particularly drawing inspiration from post-structuralist theorists who have adroitly expounded upon the notion of difference (Appiah & Gates Jr. 625). The persistent demand for a post-essentialist reconceptualisation of identity constructs has steadily gained momentum in the wake of globalisation. According to Appiah and Gates Jr., this momentum has been propelled, for instance, by the formidable resurgence of nationalist sentiments in Eastern Europe, which serves as a poignant exemplar of the forces stimulating such theoretical inquiries (625). The study of identity traverses numerous disciplinary frontiers, navigating the complex intersections of race, gender, and class within feminist and queer studies. Additionally, it ventures into the realms of postcolonialism, nationalism, and ethnicity within ethnic and area studies, among other areas of inquiry. These dynamic intersections offer a fertile ground for the elucidation and intellectual deliberation of fresh theories and discourses pertaining to identity.

In contemporary times, diverse disciplines of literature, anthropology, sociology, and politics converge on the urgent pursuit of identity and recognition. This compelling need serves as a driving force propelling nationalist movements, feminist struggles, and the politics of multiculturalism, all aimed at empowering oppressed minorities and subaltern groups. The proliferation of movements initiated by marginalised and subaltern communities in recent decades reflects a shared objective of seeking validation and acknowledgement for their distinctive identities. By scrutinising the cultural and social forces that shape these movements, as well as their negotiation of power dynamics and quest for agency within society, we gain insight into this phenomenon. Notably, postcolonial literatures emphasise the pivotal role of countering dominant discourses in reclaiming the native's cultural and ethnic identities, while diasporic literatures emerged in the early twentieth century to grapple with the identities of the exiled and displaced individuals. Additionally, contemporary movements led by minority groups such as the Lesbian Gay Bisexual

Transgender Queer plus (LGBTQ+) community and women in patriarchal societies assert their political agenda for recognition and acknowledgement, challenging prevailing discourses. Moreover, poststructuralists engage in dismantling the binary oppositions inherent in the construction of meaning. Adopting a view of identity as a linguistic construct and exploring its implications for power relations present a fresh conceptual framework for understanding identity dynamics.

In the twentieth century, the concept of identity underwent a transformative shift with the emergence of postmodernism and poststructuralism within the humanities. Influential theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault offered a new understanding of identity. In the postmodern era, Stuart Hall observes that, the "unified and stable" subject gives way to "fragmentation," leading to multiple, contradictory, and unresolved identities (276-77). This fragmentation is an inherent aspect of the tensions and conflicts within the concept of identity. Feminism, marxism, culture studies, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory all address similar structural issues related to identity. These contemporary theories aim to destabilise and deconstruct dominant narratives, centering on the subjectivity of individuals. Consequently, the concept of identity has transformed into 'identities,' highlighting fragmentation over wholeness. Terms like multiplicity and pluralism now characterise the understanding of identity.

The use of the plural form 'identities' in the title of this study, thus, signifies an acknowledgement of the multifaceted and fluid nature of identity, as explored within the literary works of the Khasi writer, Janice Pariat. Through an examination of identity formation complexities, the selected works for this study engage with the intricate and nuanced facets of identity. Pariat, in her fictional narratives, encapsulates diverse thematic agendas. Notably, a prominent thematic focus within her works revolves around the exploration of both personal and cultural identity. Pariat delves into the intricacies entailed in the construction of identities, deftly accounting for the manifold influences of heritage, historical backdrop, and sociocultural contexts. By employing adept narrative techniques, Pariat skillfully captures the arduous journey individuals undertake in their pursuit of a sense of

belonging, all while navigating the inherent tensions arising from the interplay between tradition and modernity.

Janice Pariat is a Khasi writer who was born in Jorhat, Assam. Her upbringing, however, was not confined to a single location, but rather entailed a location that spanned the hill station of Shillong and multiple tea estates scattered across Assam. Her formative years were shaped by an educational journey that began at Loreto Convent, Shillong, and culminated in attendance at The Assam Valley School, Tezpur. Her literary and intellectual endeavours continued to flourish as she obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from St. Stephen's College in Delhi, followed by a Master of Arts degree in the field of History of Art and/or Archaeology from SOAS University of London. Pariat is considered as one of the most celebrated writers in the northeast region of India, and is the first writer from Meghalaya to receive an award from the Sahitya Akademi for a work in English. She founded an online literary journal *Pyrta* in the year 2010 and her writings are featured in numerous Indian and international journals such as *Time Out, The Caravan* and *Internazionale*.

In 2013, her collection of short stories titled *Boats on Land* was bestowed with the eminent 'Sahitya Akademi Young Writer Award' in the English language, along with a 'Crossword Book Award' in the fiction genre. The book was also deemed worthy of a place among the finalists for the 2013 'Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize', and was selected for the longlists of the 2013 'Uday Lakhanpal International Short Story Award' and the 2013 'Tata Literature Live! First Book Award.' In addition to this, Pariat's debut novel *Seahorse* (2014) was shortlisted for 'The Hindu Literary Prize' in 2015, attesting to the author's skill and prowess in the realm of literary creation. Her novella *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017) was published in the United Kingdom and in ten other languages including Italian, Spanish, French, and German. Her latest novel *Everything the Light Touches* published in 2022 is shortlisted for the 'AutHer Awards 2023' in the category of fiction. In 2014, Pariat was the 'Charles Wallace Creative Writing Fellow' at the University of Kent, United Kingdom, and a 'Writer in Residence' at the TOJI Residency in South Korea in

2019. She currently teaches Creative Writing and History of Art at Ashoka University, India.

Meghalaya, often referred to as the 'abode of clouds,' stands as one of the sister states within India's North Eastern Region, predominantly inhabited by three major tribes: the Khasis, the Garos, and the Jaintias, in addition to several smaller ethnic groups. Prior to the nineteenth century, each tribe had its own autonomous kingdom, which later fell under the British administration; for example, the Khasi Hills were integrated in 1833, followed by the Jaintia Hills in 1835, and the Garo Hills between 1872 and 1873 (Haokip 303). During the British colonial rule, the Khasi Hills comprised a conglomeration of 25 distinct Khasi states. Recognising their distinct identity, the British Government classified these states as semi-independent or dependent entities. Upon the conquest of the Khasi Hills, the town of Shillong was designated as the capital of British Assam in 1864 (Haokip 303). However, several other indigenous communities, such as the Mikirs, Hajongs, Kochs, Rabhas, and others, who have considered themselves as aboriginals, have resided in the region alongside the major tribes for an extensive period.

Based on the 2011 Indian Census, the population of Meghalaya was recorded as 29.67 lakhs (Census of India 2011) out of which the Khasis constituted approximately 48 per cent of the total population of the state, followed by the Garos at 32 per cent. The remaining 22 per cent encompass various communities, including non-tribal communities such as Assamese, Bengalis, Nepalis or Gurkhas, and Hindi-speaking individuals originating from the mainland of India and other smaller tribal communities (Census of India 2011). In the post-independence era, remnants of British indirect governance manifested in the form of 'Autonomous District Councils' (ADCs), which granted a certain level of self-governance to these contiguous hills within the unified state of Assam. However, due to growing dissatisfaction with the Assamese administration and perceived socio-economic disparities faced by the plains-dwelling populace, these ADCs were eventually restructured into an independent state named Meghalaya in 1972. Covering a total expanse of 22,429 square kilometers, Meghalaya shares borders with Assam to the

east and north, and with Bangladesh to the west and south. It is worth noting that the term ‘Khasi’ is often used as a generic term to refer to the Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi, and War tribes, collectively known as the ‘Hynniewtrep’ people. They predominantly inhabit the four districts of East Meghalaya, namely the East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri-Bhoi, and Jaintia Hills districts. The Jaintias are alternatively known as ‘Pnars’. The Khasis residing in the northern lowlands and foothills are commonly referred to as ‘Bhois,’ while those in the southern regions are designated as ‘Wars’. In the Khasi Hills, the ‘Lyngams’ primarily reside in the northwestern part of the state. Despite these distinctive appellations, all claim their descent from the ‘ki hynniew-trep’ and identify themselves by the general nomenclature of ‘Khasi-Pnars’ or simply ‘Khasis’ or ‘Hynniewtrep’ (Singha and Nayak 40). On the other hand, the Garos, belonging to the Bodo family within the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, primarily inhabit Western Meghalaya. They prefer to self-identify as ‘Achiks’ and refer to the land they occupy as ‘Achik land’ (Haokip 304; Singha and Nayak 40). In addition to these three major tribes, various other tribal populations have settled in the state since its establishment. These include Hajongs, Bodo-Kacharis, Hmars, Rabhas, Mikirs, Dimasa-Kacharis, as well as certain Mizos (Lushais), Naga, and Kuki tribes, among others (Haokip 304).

While Meghalaya is relatively considered a peaceful state in comparison to some other states within the northeastern region of India[1], it has been plagued by ethnic conflicts between the indigenous community and non-local migrants since its inception in 1972. In the pre-statehood period, the Assamese community established a significant presence in Shillong, the present-day capital of Meghalaya, which had also served as the capital of British Assam. The initial wave of migrants comprised Bengalis, primarily the first-generation individuals migrating from Assam and Bangladesh, particularly Hindu Bengalis seeking refuge after communal riots in Bangladesh. These migrants found employment opportunities in key government sectors. Subsequently, Hindi-speaking communities, notably Biharis and Marwaris, as well as Nepali individuals from both India and Nepal, gradually established a stronghold in the region. They progressively gained control over business enterprises (Sharma 294-5), leading to the consolidation of economic power among non-local

communities while diminishing opportunities for the local populace. This dominance extended to business establishments, the labour force, and various employment avenues. Consequently, educated youths from the indigenous tribes faced mounting uncertainties regarding their future prospects (Singha and Nayak 41). According to Haokip, "During the colonial era, there was no discernible sense of adversarial discord between the 'settler' community and the 'indigenous' community; instead, it exemplified an era of shared experiences supported by common trade, friendships, and cultural coexistence" (305-6).

Initially, a sense of perceived economic deprivation among the indigenous tribes in Meghalaya led to a series of ethnic upheavals between the local communities and the migrant settler groups in 1979, 1987, and 1992. These incidents were characterised by cycles of ethnic cleansing, which reverberated throughout the state during the 1980s. Notably, the Garo Hills witnessed the emergence of the Achik Liberation Matgrik Army (ALMA) and the Achik National Volunteer Council (ANVC), while the Khasi Hills saw the rise of the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HLNC). During these tumultuous periods, individuals from Nepali, Bengali, Bihari, and Marwari communities became prime targets of such violent acts. The Bengalis, in particular, were heavily affected by ethnic violence in the 1990s conflict. The consequences of this unrest manifested in a substantial exodus of Bengalis from Meghalaya, with an estimated 25,000 to 35,000 individuals relocating to other parts of the country, primarily West Bengal, since the early 1980s. In 1981, the Bengali population in Meghalaya stood at 119,571, accounting for 8.13 per cent of the state's overall population. However, a decade later in 1991, this figure had significantly dwindled to 5.97 per cent of the total population (Phukan 100).

The ascent of ethnocentric politics appeared as a prominent catalyst for identity-based conflicts, where the primacy of cultural superiority among two tribal communities, namely the Khasis and the Garos, over the non-tribal or *dkhar* populace became the focal point. Driven by political motivations, this ethnocentrism resulted in deplorable acts perpetrated against the non-tribal population in Meghalaya. The Khasi Hills, in particular, witnessed a conspicuous manifestation of

this trend, as the newfound dominance of the Khasis in the political landscape of the newly formed state incited them to challenge the previously established ascendancy of the non-tribal population. In the post-1993 era, Meghalaya experienced a prevailing atmosphere of relatively harmonious coexistence between the tribal and non-tribal communities. Nonetheless, intermittent periods of estrangement have arisen among the tribal communities, often stemming from minor incidents or state government policies aimed at safeguarding their economic interests, cultural identity, and territorial rights.

The present research is a study of the fictional narratives of the celebrated Khasi writer, Janice Pariat – *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* (2012), *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017) and *Seahorse* (2014). The primary texts selected for the study reflect the experiences of the Khasi community through different stages of their history: the colonial era, the post-colonial era and the modern period. It also explores the myths and belief system of the Khasis and her narratives, especially in *Boats on Land*, interweave the apparent reality of life with the folkloric and the mundane with the surreal. The co-existence of different realities in the northeast and the experiences of the tribe throughout the history have been portrayed and recalled in her stories. Pariat, by creatively referring to the Khasi myths, strives to revive the pre-modern world and through her conscious depiction of certain enduring values lived in their everyday life, her stories tried to reclaim identity and further challenge all stereotypes constructed by the mainstream literature. Apart from depicting the post-modern condition of the Khasi society, Pariat's narratives also depict a vivid image of the unrest situation in Meghalaya in the late twentieth century which has been used as a backdrop in most of her stories. Beside this, homosexuality also forms an important theme in her stories. The novel *Seahorse*, for instance, explores the complex relationship between the protagonist, Nehemiah and the English art historian, Nicholas. The novel is apparently a modern retelling of the Greek myth of Poseidon and his youthful male devotee named Pelops. Two stories in *Boats on Land*, "Secret Corridors" and "Boats on Land", also explore the theme of queerness and how these queer subjects' emotion and identity are oppressed and subjugated by the society. These texts also depict how the LGBTQ+ communities have been

subjected to discrimination, domination, subordination and hegemonic suppression by the existing discourse of our society. In her novel *Seahorse* and some stories in *Boats on Land*, Pariat takes a fresh look at the issue of postmodern sexual identity without being affected by the stigma associated with it. Identity, in the past was considered to be permanent and unchanging. However, since the 1960s, identity, conceived as such has now come under challenge from various intellectual developments such as postmodernism. Under such movements, identity has now become fragments instead of being a whole; the notion of identity has been replaced by the notion of identities. Multiplicity and pluralism are now terms associated with identity.

Janice Pariat's stories in *Boats on Land* mostly centred in Shillong, Cherrapunji and Assam. However, the settings of her other fictions move from one place to another; for instance, from Delhi to London in *Seahorse* and from some familiar unnamed Indian cities to London in *The Nine-Chambered Heart*. In the novel, *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, nine characters recall their relationship with the same unnamed woman and the character of this unnamed protagonist is understood and perceived through their memories. Set in some unnamed and familiar cities and moving from one place to another, the novel is a compendium of shifting perspectives that follow the life of one woman. The novel thus "transcends the idea of a singular opinion or 'truth' and ushers the reader in a world of possibilities of knowing the protagonist by offering alternative narratives" (Phonglo 933).

Oral literature plays an important role in the literature from the northeast region of India. Oral literature may be regarded as a lens through which one can view a vibrant story-telling tradition of a particular tribe. This old story-telling tradition is sometimes integrated into the modern literature that gives a distinct identity to the literature of the northeast region. In her collection *Boats on Land*, Pariat creatively interweaves myths and superstition with political, historical and social events which are both local and international. The Khasi culture was largely oral until the mid-1800s when the Christian missionaries transcribed the Khasi language into the Roman script. Since oral tradition holds an important role in the life of the Khasis,

the people hold great reverence to the oral tradition and it holds an important part of their social interaction. All these things have resulted into the shaping of this collection.

In the oral culture, all accounts have survived through story-telling and thus the tradition, custom, origin, natural phenomenon and history are explained by the oral narratives and it is through these narratives that we are able to understand their imaginations and understanding of the world. Every community has its own myths and tales, which are passed down through the spoken word from generation to generation; and thus, myths are regarded to be the product of communities' primitive belief and culture. So, by studying myths and folklore, we can learn how different societies have their own answers to basic questions about the world and man's place in it. Defining the meaning of myths, Maria Leach writes:

> Myths tell of the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; they tell why a certain animal has its characteristics (e.g. why the bat is blind or flies only at night), why or how certain natural phenomena came to be (e.g. why the rainbow appears or how the constellation Orion got into the sky), how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue. (778)

Since, the myths remain an integral part in the lives of the Khasis, every natural phenomenon – birth, illness, death – are explained and understood through it. In Pariat's stories, the everyday life of the common people is infused with the folkloristic and a deep belief in the supernatural. The stories in *Boats on Land* are the stories of ordinary people: farmer, doctors, soldiers, school girls, tailor, hunters, the ill, the dead and the lovelorn youngsters. However, Pariat sees their lives through a kaleidoscope and paints their stories with the magical qualities of myth and folklore. It is the meeting point between reality and myth. The shape-shifters (men whose souls can inhabit animals) and the mysterious and tragic death at the end in "Sky Graves", the strange dreams of Lucy and its connection to real incidents in "Kut Madan", the mysterious disappearance of Ezra in "The Discovery of Flight", the transformation of human's spirit into trees in "The Keeper of Souls", the mysterious stories of the fairies in "The Golden Mahseer" and "Embassy" all depict the

creativity of Pariat in weaving the everyday with the folkloristic. A sense of mystery and supernatural inform most of these stories, however, in each story Pariat abstains from imposing her own subjective commentary, purposefully leaving her stories unexplained and culminating in a mysterious manner. Consequently, a profound adherence to mythological beliefs, serving as a conduit for expression and comprehension of the world, permeates the characters within Pariat's stories. By traversing the boundaries of fact, reality, and myth, these narratives wholeheartedly embrace individuals and their arduous struggles to confront the realities of life. By giving life to tales and mythical entities, these stories facilitate a profound understanding of the Khasis' cultural heritage and the enduring tenets of their traditional beliefs. In an interview with Pranami Tamuli, Pariat explains how the supernatural and magical touch is deeply embedded in the Khasi's tales and how she incorporated this in her stories:

> The communities I grew up in, the Khasis and Jaintias, have this wonderful penchant for the fantastic, 'tall stories' that are borderline unbelievable. In this way, the supernatural touches many tales that don't necessarily involve ghosts. It is a deeply embedded element of our folklore and folk tales, especially because the Khasis and Jaintias hold animist beliefs, of spirits that inhabit forests, rivers, and the wilderness. The stories in *Boats on Land* blend the mundane and the magical, the quixotic and the extraordinary precisely because our 'realities' are multilayered and complex in this manner. There are ghosts within us, perhaps even around us. We live in an ancient world that I like to think is still replete with mystery. ("I'm What's called an Ethnic Mongrel")

Moreover, these narratives can be interpreted as Pariat's endeavour to reclaim the cultural legacy and collective identity of the Khasis, while also seeking to resurrect their pre-modern milieu. Additionally, these stories serve as an earnest pursuit to revive the invaluable oral tradition, which intricately mirrors the economic and social fabric of the community.

In *Boats on Land*, the narratives not only serve as literary tales but also function as an intricate tapestry of historical and sociological accounts that unravel the multifaceted nuances of the northeastern region, with a particular focus on Meghalaya and Assam. The trajectory of the stories traverses centuries, commencing in the 1800s and culminating in the current era. Imbued within these narratives is an underlying exploration of identity, which assumes a pivotal thematic role throughout the narratives. Indeed, the Khasi identity movement, a fervent pursuit undertaken by the Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the Hynneiwtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) in the waning decades of the twentieth century, resonates as an ever-present backdrop within many of these stories. It is against this backdrop that the intricate web of unrest, which pervades the milieu of Shillong, comes into focus, casting its shadow upon the quotidian existence of the common people. Consequently, these stories peel back the layers to expose the profound impact of this unrest on the fabric of daily life.

One poignant story, titled "19/87," unearths the life of Suleiman, a Jewish protagonist and a masterful kite flier, whose existence has been perpetually ensconced within the oppressive clasp of threat and violence. Through the narrative, the reader is transported into the complex terrain of Suleiman's lived experiences, where he navigates the delicate balance between survival and self-expression, as his kite soars amidst an atmosphere rife with peril:

> 'My father says it's getting too dangerous to live in Shillong'. . . . Now, around him Suleiman heard, 'It was the Nepalis in '79, the Bengalis in '81, then the Marwaris. . . who knows it'll be our turn. . . . The cluster of Muslim families living in the area rapidly grew smaller.' (Pariat, "19/87" 98-99)

Ensnared within the confines of curfew and dark nights, even the exuberant and spirited youth seek solace in the intoxicating embrace of alcohol and drugs. Explored within the story, "Laitlum," a cohort of youthful characters relentlessly endeavours to forge pathways towards liberation and hedonistic pleasures amid the tumultuous milieu of curfew and violence. However, their aspirations are met with disappointment and an insatiable desire as the urban landscape metamorphoses,

leaving them yearning for a fulfillment that remains elusive amidst the ever-shifting political atmosphere: “The peaceful little place they’d grown up in... its safe streets and pine-dappled innocence. . . [has] transform[ed] before their eyes” (Pariat, “Laitlum” 129). Since, freedom has been snatched away from them, the only place that gives them comfort and freedom is a spot at the outskirt of the town, ‘Laitlum’:

> ‘Why is this place called Laitlum?’ asked Melvin suddenly. ‘It means where the hills are set free’ answered Grace. . . ‘When you’re sitting here. . . all the shit in life seems far away.’ (138-139)

Within this locus, they congregate, engaging in convivial exchanges, imbibing libations, and seeking respite from the tribulations that pervade the urban sphere. Laitlum, thus, emerges as a metaphorical embodiment, encapsulating the yearning for emancipation and tranquility deeply ingrained within the psyche of the youthful cohort. The profound emotional bond between the characters and their homeland, Shillong, becomes unequivocally evident in the stories of Pariat. In contemporary times, our understanding of the concept of land and identity, labeled as territoriality, has been located in the nation and state. It has always been a burning topic in academic disciplines like History, Conflict Studies, International Relations, Sociology and International Politics. The recent centuries witnessed certain kinds of violent rebellion between countries and states demanding for their separate homeland or reclaiming their land or territory and also some minorities struggling for independence. The fundamental objectives of such struggles were the preservation of their land, or the creation of their own homeland so as to build and foster their own identity. In this connection, Hall has rightly put:

> Our sense of place is really part of our cultural systems of meaning. We usually think about or imagine cultures as “placed” – landscaped, even if only in the mind. This helps to give shape and to give foundation to our identities. However, the way in which culture, place and identity are imagined and conceptualized are increasingly untenable in the light of the historical and contemporary evidence. (186)

This study will also look into the dynamics of identity and violence with special references to the experiences of the smaller ethnic communities represented in the selected primary texts.

Pariat's debut novel, *Seahorse* explores the theme of queerness and the relationship between time, memory and art. The novel depicts the life of a protagonist, Nehemiah or Nem whose sexuality may be defined by some as bisexual since the novel depicts him as having relationship with both men and women. However, the author does not choose to define his sexuality or sometimes his gender in the novel. In an interview with *Verve* magazine, Pariat explains:

> In *Seahorse*, many of my characters are queer, choosing not to define their sexuality, and sometimes even their gender. It didn't consciously start out as a political work, but with the upholding of Section 377 in India, I think it's tremendously important that we address, constantly, how ridiculous and dangerous it is to label and judge people's sexuality. ("All Labels Bother Me")

However, in some stories in *Boats on Land* like "Secret Corridors" and "Boats on Land" Pariat postulates her concept of sexual identity through her female characters. In the "Secret Corridors," we see how the protagonist, Natalie continuously seeks to forge relationship with the other fellow school girls. The narration also examines how "the protagonist's sexuality profoundly influences her consciousness and how she eventually succeeds in establishing a powerful bond with another woman" (Goswami 29). The secret affection and sensation that she has for her classmate Iba, which is hidden in the secret corridors of her heart, cannot be revealed to anyone, since society regarded such lesbian encounter and homosexual identity as evil and unacceptable.

The story "Boats on Land" also narrates the lesbian encounter between the unnamed narrator from Shillong and an unnamed girl from Chandbari, a tea estate in Assam. In the story, the narrator recalls her relationship with a girl during her family's winter holiday at Chandbari. The story is mainly about a young girl's

discovery of her sexual identity and how this has affected her psyche. At the opening of the story, we have learned that the narrator has affection for boys which is revealed by her relationship with a young boy Jason. However, when the narrator met this girl in Assam, things changed and developed slowly and her experience and interaction had completely changed her sexual identity.

The physical relationship between the narrator and the girl thus becomes a transformation to the narrator's sexual identity and on their way back she begins to see the world from a different perspective. The story is thus a testimony of the recent proclamation made by certain queer theories that stated that one's sexual identity is never fixed but is liable to change any time. Contemporary theorists see sexuality and identity as a social construct. For the postmodernists, identity is never determined in an object, but is constructed by a discourse. A person's identity is, thus, determined by the discourses of religion, location, law, family, sexuality and so on. An early attempt on taking sexuality as a social construction was made by Mary Mackintosh in her 1968 essay, "The Homosexual Role." According to Mackintosh, "society constructed itself as pure and safe by labeling some persons as 'deviant' and criminal" and this label is thus a "form of social control that assumed some people were naturally deviant" (qtd. in Nayar 187). Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* "theorized sexuality within structures and discourses of power. . . that certain forms of sexuality were constructed as unnatural and evil in its practitioners" (qtd. in Nayar 186). Foucault, thus, locates sexuality as construction of social norms and the discourses of the society. This study will make an in-depth analysis of the concept of sexuality and identity and make a textual analysis of select Pariat's narratives.

Pariat's fictional works are mainly characterised by the centrality of identity politics such as the marginalisation of the LGBTQ+ community, the continuous struggles of the minority communities for cultural, geographical and political space and the subjectivity of identity. The problematisation of the research lies in the fluidity of identity of the ethnic community especially in the post-colonial era and

individuals fighting against the categorisation under such identity. The fictions in this study will throw light on the Khasi cultural ethos and identity.

The various determinants of identity and the contradicting ideologies in the formation of identity have been explored and scrutinised in this research. It also attempts to examine the role of myth in the formation of identity, the existence of different realities in the world of myth and fiction, the use of violence as a means of protecting one's identity, political and geographical space, and the search for acceptance and political identity by the sexually oppressed section of the society.

Pariat's stories frequently develop from the intersection of culture, territory, violence, myths and identity. Her exploration of different shades of identity across time and space provides a new vista of identity that needs to be examined in the light of various intellectual and political developments in the post-colonial era.

The central concern of this study revolves around the interrogation of identities portrayed in the selected fictions of Janice Pariat. Her works often offer nuanced and multi-layered representations of identity, encompassing diverse themes such as cultural, gender, racial, and regional identities. By examining these narratives, we seek to understand how Pariat's characters navigate the intricate webs of identity, how they negotiate societal expectations and norms, and how their journeys contribute to our understanding of the broader complexities of human existence.

The second chapter titled "Rethinking Identity" serves as the foundational framework for the present study. It delves into an intricate exploration of the multifaceted determinants of identity as expounded across diverse academic disciplines, including but not limited to philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science and literary studies. By critically scrutinising the transformative impacts of mid-twentieth century sociopolitical movements and the concomitant emergence of contemporary literary theories, such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminism, and other allied schools of thought, this chapter endeavours to elucidate how these theories have effectively contested the entrenched

and conventional essentialist notions of identity as fixed and static. Instead, they have engendered a paradigmatic shift toward a fluid and dynamic conceptualisation of identities. Moreover, the chapter discerningly contemplates the profound sway exerted by these identity politics on the domain of literary studies, underscoring how literature has assumed an exceedingly dynamic arena for the negotiation and exploration of a plenitude of identities. Particular attention is dedicated to the emergence of a multitude of literary voices representing the northeast/Khasi cultural and communal ethos, alongside a fervent examination of the postcolonial struggle for sociopolitical agency and territorial sovereignty in this region. In this chapter, significant emphasis is placed on the interrogation and analysis of various ideological contradictions inherent within the formation of identity, thereby enriching the scholarly discourse and fostering a more nuanced understanding of this intricate domain.

The third chapter, titled "Myth and Identity," undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the manifold conceptions of myth and identity as manifested within the selected primary texts. This inquiry endeavours to provide a fresh perspective on the author's distinctive writing technique, specifically focusing on her adept interweaving of mythological elements with reality in her narratives, thus positioning this creative endeavour as an act of resistance and counter-discourse. The chapter undertakes a meticulous analysis of carefully chosen short stories from Pariat's renowned collection, *Boats on Land*. By creatively invoking Khasi myths and legends, the author strives to revive the pre-modern world, conscientiously portraying enduring values that permeate the fabric of everyday life. In doing so, these narratives actively strive to reclaim a distinct cultural identity while concurrently challenging the pervasive stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream literary discourse.

In essence, many of Pariat's narratives may be comprehended as a form of realist fiction, as they poignantly capture the lived experiences of the indigenous Khasi community, which predominantly thrives through oral traditions, rather than attempting to represent it within the confines of the Western written tradition. The

chapter infers on how this distinctive approach precipitates a significant subversion of the hegemonic chirographic structures of representation, which historically endorse Western civilising paradigms and economic agendas. Instead, Pariat's narratives employ a predominantly oral narrative mode, thus assertively foregrounding the pre-colonial cultural values of the Khasi people that have been overshadowed by the ascendancy of written culture. Employing a stylistic, character-driven, and narratively structured approach that aligns harmoniously with the cultural fabric under scrutiny, Pariat's stories vividly portray the intricate tapestry of an oral society. Through meticulous attention to narrative style and organisation, these narratives depict the essence of an oral culture, thereby enabling the readers to identify the Khasi traditions and customs.

The fourth chapter titled "Sexual Identity: Queering Pariat's Fictional Characters" focuses on the intricate terrain of gender politics and sexual identity, as encapsulated within the selected primary texts, namely *Seahorse*, *The Nine-Chambered Heart,* and two short stories taken from *Boats on Land*. It undertakes a comprehensive examination of the narrative elements that illuminate the themes of belonging and alienation. These narratives deftly navigate the struggle of sexual minorities as they endeavour to secure recognition within the domains of both political and cultural spheres. This chapter critically explores the transformative shift in the understanding of identity, which has evolved from a once unified and rigid concept to one marked by fluidity and multiplicity. Leveraging insights derived from psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer theory, this chapter delves into the intricate process through which identity is forged within the contours of societal norms.

Within this theoretical framework, the chapter probes the representation of queer desire within Pariat's fictional narratives. These narratives defy ossified categorisations of identity and subvert the hegemonic scripts that dictate normative frameworks. By foregrounding the multifaceted nature and inherent instability of identities, her literary works disrupt prevailing assumptions and societal expectations. In doing so, these narratives emerge as potent vehicles that afford fresh

perspectives on alternative identities, extending far beyond the confines of pre-constructed identity paradigms.

The fifth chapter, titled "Violence and Identity: The Politics of Belonging and Unbelonging," undertakes an in-depth analysis of select stories from the collection *Boats on Land*. It also explores the intricate interplay between violence and identity, with particular emphasis on the nuanced Khasi experiences within the broader context of the northeast region. This chapter examines how these texts effectively respond to the socio-political landscape prevalent in the state of Meghalaya and the encompassing northeast region in the present era.

The chapter unravels the multifaceted insights offered by the selected works, shedding light upon the complexities inherent in the process of identity formation, as well as the intricate dynamics of belonging and unbelonging within the sociopolitical milieu of Meghalaya. It probes how Pariat's stories adeptly capture the recent political upheavals between the Khasis and non-Khasis (*dkhars* or outsiders) in Shillong, following Meghalaya's statehood in 1972. Moreover, the stories depict the socio-cultural and economic realities experienced by both Khasis and non-Khasis during and subsequent to the colonial era. Notably, these narratives effectively challenge the prevalent notion that newcomers/outsiders ought to be met with suspicion or hostility upon entering a new social environment. Rather, they advocate for an inclusive approach that recognises the inherent value of engaging with the unfamiliar, as opposed to marginalising or ostracising them. By defying conventional norms and emphasising the potential for genuine human connections across cultural and social boundaries, Pariat's works thus endeavour to dismantle the artificial constructs of a homogenous and pure Khasi identity. Instead, they engender a narrative space wherein the authentic complexities of human existence are acknowledged, celebrated, and explored. Through this subversion of divisive constructs, Pariat's narratives foster broader ethos of inclusivity and pave the way for profound socio-cultural transformations within Meghalaya's multifaceted fabric.

## Note

[1]The term 'Northeast' is this thesis refers to the northeastern region of India comprising Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura.

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# CHAPTER TWO [1]

# RETHINKING IDENTITY

In recent years, academics from a wide range of social science and humanities have developed a keen interest in questions related to identity. The concept of ‘identity’ is central to the study on nationalism and ethnic conflict. It informs numerous discourses on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and culture in connection to liberalism and its alternatives in political theory. The historical and cultural construction of identities of all forms has recently been a subject of interest for both social historians and students of culture and literature due to influences ranging from poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault to the discourse over multiculturalism. Despite this significant increased and widespread interest in identity, the idea itself remains somewhat enigmatic. What Phillip Gleason noted fourty years ago still stands now; dictionary definitions, which use previous definitions of the word, do not adequately capture the concept of identity as we currently understand it (913–931). Our present concept of identity is largely considered as a social construct that has just recently emerged, and it is also rather complex and multifaceted. Regardless of whether everyone is aware of the proper usage of the word in everyday speech, it can be challenging to provide a succinct and accurate description that encompasses the full spectrum of its current meanings.

Literature has long been involved in identity-related questions and offer either implicit or overt solutions. Particularly in narrative literature, readers have followed characters’ destinies as they come to identify themselves and as they become defined by various confluences of their past, their decisions, and the societal forces that have influenced them. A variety of implicit concepts of identity formation are presented in literary works. The fact that literature offers a rich resources for challenging sociological and political interpretations of the part played by such aspects in the construction of identity is largely responsible for the recent development of theorising about gender, race, and sexuality in the area of literary studies. Here, the issue of whether the subject’s identity is given or constructed can be taken into consideration. Both possibilities are well-represented in literature, and the complexities or entanglements are recurrently laid out for us, like in the typical plot where characters, for instance, discover who they are, not through understanding

something about their own past, but by acting in a manner that makes them into what then ultimately turned out, to have been their nature.

A significant proportion of contemporary theory can be understood as an effort to resolve the paradoxes that frequently influence how identity is treated in literature. Literary works typically depict individuals, therefore, conflicts over identity are conflicts both within and between individuals and groups. Characters in literary works either struggle against or conform to social norms and standards.

In contemporary period, a number of strands in contemporary literature, anthropology, sociology, and politics are centred on the need and demand for identity and recognition. And it might be argued that this need is a driving force that motivates many nationalist movements. This need also manifests itself in various forms of feminism, and on behalf of oppressed minorities or subaltern groups, and in what is now known as the politics of multiculturalism. Recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of movements initiated by marginalised and subaltern groups, all of which share a common goal of seeking recognition and validation of their respective identities. This phenomenon can be analysed through an examination of the cultural and social forces that shape these movements, as well as the ways in which they negotiate power dynamics and struggle for agency within society. In the postcolonial literatures, for instance, countering dominant discourses constructing their ethnic identity becomes pivotal in the natives' location and reclamation of their cultural and ethnic identity. For example, African postcolonial writers often engage with themes related to the colonial experience and decolonisation, thus presenting the authenticity of their culture and identity through their fictional narratives. This literary tactic serves as a means of subverting dominant colonial discourses and asserting the agency and authenticity of native perspectives. The desire for reclaiming the lost cultural ethos of the Igbo community, and the post-colonial thirst for acknowledging one's forgotten dignity have been a major theme in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The early twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of diasporic literatures which mainly dealt with the identity of the exiled and displaced individuals. Other minority groups such as the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer plus (LGBTQ+) community and women in patriarchal or men-

dominated societies, in recent times, have come up with a political agenda of recognition and acknowledgement of their identity against which dominant discourses are constructed. For political thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, this recent crave for recognition and dignity by the marginalised and oppressed classes subsequently resulted into the evolution of "identity politics, in which individuals demand[ed] public recognition of their worth" (10). Poststructuralists too are engaged in dismantling the structuralists notion of binary oppositions that underlined the construction of meaning. Understanding identity as a linguistic construct and its study as a ground for power relations generate a new concept in understanding identity.

Simply put, what lies in the core of the word 'identity' is the binary of 'sameness' and 'difference'. Its definition appears simple; however it is more than complex to understand. It can mean differently to different people and in different disciplines and field of studies. Its changeable character may offer diverse explanation and interpretation in different contexts. For some, the term is used to refer to their affiliation to specific ethnic community, to their personal values, to their attachment to specific religious community, or their nations. Premordialists consider nations and ethnic identities to be fixed, natural and ancient; however, constructionists believe in the existence of multiple identities; and the interactionists believe in the synthesis of both elements.

The notion that there is something surreptitious in the formation and construction of identity is particularly significant to the social thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the Freudian psychoanalysis, for instance, emphasis has been made on the hidden and repressed dimension of the self. However, there are also other traditions of social thought, to which this concealed or hidden depth to identity is considered merely illusory. How beit, in order to examine some of the issues that have emerged here, we must first turn our focus to a more distant time in order to grasp how these notion and discourse of recognition and identity came to appear familiar, or at least understandable, to us.

The established psychological and sociological literature that informs current thinking about identity dates back to the late nineteenth century; however, theological and philosophical approach to identity goes back much further as early as the seventeenth century. Greek philosopher, Socrates' instruction to his disciples, 'know thyself' "became a point of departure for one of the richest fields of philosophical investigation, from the Socrates through the 'confessions' of Christian thinkers in the medieval period to idealism and materialism in the modern era" (Coulmas 28). This lead has been followed by rationalist like René Descartes (1596-1650) who postulated a popular line, 'I Think therefore I Am' (*Cogito ergo sum* in Latin), meaning that, being endowed with reason is what allows someone to say that s/he exists. Descartes' argument was that, whatever ambiguities surround us and however influential sceptics' assertions, there is one thing about which each of us can be certain: I am thinking (*cogito*). Descartes continued by claiming that this unquestionable consciousness of thought led to existence (*ergo sum*). His notion of the conscious, rational, individual subject has had such a significant impact that it is now referred to as the Cartesian subject. Descartes separated between the mind and body in this process and placed a significant emphasis on consciousness. This focus was slightly changed by English empiricist philosopher, John Locke, who, along with rationality, placed emphasis on a particular type of self-knowledge, personal memory, as a prerequisite for individual identity. According to him, consciousness, not the physical body, is what connects all of a person's past acts to create a personal self that is the same now as it was fourty years ago or yesterday (Locke 213). The background for the sociological concept of identity that emerged in the nineteenth century was this Cartesian subject together with the Lockean 'sovereign individual' that has merged with the individual entrepreneur of liberal economics based on Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. In the history of the west, the notion of an individual self is a comparatively recent development (Woodward 6).

Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), a rationalist, carried on the tradition of emphasising consciousness as the foundation of the individual self. Ernst Cassirer continued to refer to *autognosis* (self-knowledge or understanding of one's nature and abilities) as the ultimate goal of philosophical inquiry even a century later. Since

antiquity, philosophy has been accompanied by the query of how consciousness and self-awareness relate to the personal identity. The complex responses offered by sages of various philosophies demonstrate, among other things, that self-awareness is more than simply being conscious. However, it appears to be a never-ending endeavour, creating new challenges with each solution (Coulmas 29). For example, if self-knowledge and personal memory form a basis of individual identity, the case of forgetfulness and loss of memory, according to Coulmas, may pose two related problems, "the first concerns identity through time, the second the mind-body problem" (30). The Presocratic thinkers are of the opinion that everything under the sun changes continually and this means that individual identity too undergoes changes through time. The materialist worldview seeks to explain everything in terms of the movements, collisions and alterations of the immovable atoms, which also include the atoms that make up human's sense perceptions and mental experiences. However, it is challenging to imagine human persistence in the face of bodily change. The essentialists, for instance, propose the idea that human beings' essence was rational and that our identity is rooted in the soul, which has an unchangeable essence. The human body perishes over time; however, the soul is immortal and retains its identity over time.

Scientific advancement, triggered by the Enlightenment, however, motivates numerous philosophers in accepting the Cartesian dualism that the soul cannot simply exist without its embodiment. The regeneration of the human brain cells, according to the neurologist is limited, and therefore human becomes more forgetful with changing time. Thus, this indicates the possibility of retaining one's identity even if it is under the pressure of loss of memory (to which Locke's idea of self-identity solely rests). One's identity may be retained and recognised by the external social (nurture) influence. However, acknowledging the societal (nurture) influence on individual identity does not discard biology (nature) as a determining factor. Personal identity is more than merely a convention accepted by others. Moreover, social theories of identity do not provide a simple solution.

Another problem that may arise in theorising identity is regarding group or ethnic identity. Human beings differ greatly in terms of colour, language, religion,

ancestry and kinship, residential habits, tool use, clothes, cuisine, and other factors. These characteristics make up 'ethnicity,' indicating what appear to be distinct differences, although their relevance for a comprehensive classification is constrained. They are ambiguous, allowing for temporary and fluctuating attachment, contingent, and hence subject to continual flux. Furthermore, how we perceive ourselves frequently differs from how others perceive us.

Physical anthropology has assisted cultural anthropology, a natural offspring of colonialism, in its efforts to establish ethnicities or ethnic groupings for the sake of study. The nineteenth century witnessed a multitude of theories on race as a result of Charles Darwin's groundbreaking work on evolution, many of which built on or evolved into erroneous racist doctrines. Skin colour and other physical characteristics were not recognised as markers of human races until the 1980s, when significant advances in genetic research gave rise to the monogenesis idea, which postulated that all humans share an African ancestor. Since then, race has largely been disregarded by human biologists as a valid classification (Coulmas 50). However, ethnographers continued to separate groups and subgroups, substituting race with culture, which is viewed as the collection of artifacts, practices, beliefs, and institutions that a community accepts. The ethnographer's chosen subject of study is consequently small groups that exist in distant locations and maintain primitive traditions. Ethnicity and cultural identity, on the other hand, are not immutable and unchanging nor do they appear to be being swept up in the maelstrom of globalisation. In the 1960s, Fredrik Barth and his associates proposed the constructivist view of identity by focusing their attention on individuals who switch their ethnic affiliation. This view of identity claims that while ethnic identification is acquired at birth, there is still room for change and different levels of affiliation. Many ethnic groupings are the product of very recent fission or fusion, rather than retaining their ancient culture. Selective similarity and dissimilarity standards serve as the foundation for ethnic identification (Barth 213). As desired or practical, they can be suspended or foregrounded. The development of an ethnic group's identity always occurs in the context of its interactions with other groups, and the degree of boundary permeability relies on the nature of these interactions. The nation state with a homogeneous ethnic

composition is a rare exception. Therefore, within the broad framework of a state, multiple levels and degrees of interaction exist amongst ethnic groups. One of the pioneers of sociology, Max Weber, also based his idea of community formation not on what could appear to be objective—that is, biological—criteria like race and innate genealogical relations, but in perceived remoteness and fostered exclusivity, which together establish group identity. Ethnicity was a social rather than a natural truth, according to Weber (Roth and Wittich 389).

The growing number of immigrants living in urban areas in the West today may have been the reason that led to a heightened consciousness regarding ethnic identity. This form of identity, according to cultural anthropologists, is what distinguishes demographic groupings whose members concur on characteristics that distinguish them unique from others, most notably language, race, and religion. While members of the groups so identified have a tendency to view these standards as being set in stone, they are social rather than biological. Therefore, despite the members of an ethnicity believing in its intransience, ethnic identities can adapt to changing circumstances.

Over the past few decades, modern societies have witnessed people and groups fighting for their identity and recognition. Movements initiated by the oppressed class, underrepresented groups, marginalised communities, or subaltern, among others, all have this same goal of achieving identity and respect. For political theorists like Francis Fukuyama, the marginalised and oppressed classes' recent need for respect and dignity led to the development of "identity politics, in which individuals demand[ed] public recognition of their worth" (10). The notion of binary oppositions that underlie the creation of meaning is being dismantled by poststructuralists as well. A new notion in comprehending identity is created by understanding identity as a linguistic construct and studying it as a foundation for power interactions.

To completely understand the politics of identity in the contemporary society, we must first broaden our study and focus to the understanding of and discourse regarding the formation of individual identity. Initially, identity develops from a

separation between one's genuine inner self and the social laws and norms of the outside world, which inadequately does not acknowledge the value or dignity of that inner self. Throughout human history, individuals have come into conflict with their society. However, the belief that the true inner self is fundamentally valued and that the outer society values the former unfairly and systematic manner has only recently gained traction. It is not necessary to transform one's inner self to adhere to social norms, but rather society as a whole.

Theories of behaviour, which in turn are based on theories of human nature, are the foundation for identity theories and identity politics since they explain patterns of behaviour that are rooted in universal human biology rather than in the norms or traditions of the various societies in which people live. Theorising in-depth about the 'state of nature,' a primordial period before the emergence of human society, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were among the early modern intellectuals who engaged in this practice. Such debates of human nature have a much longer history in western philosophy, at least as far back as Plato's *Republic* (c. 375 BCE). Plato's *Republic* is a discussion about the characteristics of a just city between the philosopher Socrates and the two young aristocratic Athenians, Adeimantus and his brother Glaucon. Here, Plato creates a just city through speech based on an assessment of the nature of the soul (from Greek word *psyche*). The question of whether the soul is one or divided into pieces is one that Socrates and his interlocutors Glaucon and Adeimantus are attempting to address in Book IV, part 5 of the *Republic*. Socrates states:

> It's obvious that nothing can do two opposite things, or be in two opposite states, in the same part of itself, at the same time, in relation to the same object. So if this is what we find happening in these examples, we shall know there was not just one element involved, but more than one. (Ferrari 131)

For instance, given that each individual only has one soul, it would appear impossible for someone to concurrently desire something while also having an aversion to it at the same time, like when one is enticed to commit a crime but also feels an aversion to it. Socrates and Glaucon both concur that it shouldn't be possible

for the soul to be in one state and its opposite at the same time. This implies that the soul must have at least two aspects, which they called the desiring part ('apetite') and the calculating ('reason') part (Ferrari 124-125). This distinction of the soul closely corresponds to Sigmund Freud's idea of the desiring 'id' and 'ego,' which kept human desires under control, that were mostly the product of societal pressure. But Plato goes on to identify a third element, 'spirit,' (a poor translation of the Greek word *thymos*) which in a sound mind should be in accord with reason. The 'thymos' is the part of the psyche that serves as the seat of worth judgments as well as the source of rage and pride. For instance, the character in the book, Leontius was proud of himself and thought he was a superior self who would not stare at the corpse; when he gave in to his desire, he became upset and angry with himself for not upholding that standard.

According to Fukuyama, this "third part of the soul, thymos, is the seat of today's identity politics" (18) and all human beings "have their pride. . . [and] always want to be seen as superior, a powerful feeling of resentment arises when one is disrespected" (21). He also argues that the search for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalised by their society is the driving force behind contemporary identity politics. He writes:

> Contemporary identity politics is driven by the quest for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalised by their societies. But that desire for equal recognition can easily slide over into a demand for recognition of the group's superiority. This is a large part of the story of nationalism and national identity, as well as certain forms of extremist religious politics today. (22)

The *thymos* is the component of the psyche that craves recognition. Only a small group of people in the *Republic* demanded recognition of their dignity since they were willing to put their lives in danger as soldiers. But every human soul also appears to harbour the craving for recognition. The general populace and everyday folks are likewise susceptible to the hurt of disrespect. They are being informed by their society, though, that they are not worth as much as aristocrats. This was the fate

of the vast majority of people over a significant portion of human history. But, for Fukuyama, while *thymos* has always been a part of human nature, the idea that "each of us has an inner self that is worthy of respect, and that the surrounding society may be wrong in not recognising it, is a more recent phenomenon" (23-24). Although the idea of identity has its roots in *thymos*, it wasn't until contemporary times that it was linked with the radical idea that one's inner self is more valuable than their outer self. Fukuyama also argues that, this was the result of a "shift in ideas about the self and the realities of societies that started to evolve rapidly under the pressures of economic and technological change" (24).

The affirmation of that inner being that is not permitted to express itself is accorded the highest value in the modern concept of identity, which values authenticity above all. It supports the inner self rather than the outward self. A person frequently has no genuine understanding of who the inner self is and simply a fuzzy sense that they are being conditioned to live a lie. According to Fukuyama, this may result in a fixation on the question "Who am I, really?" and only when one "accepts that inner self and receives public recognition for it" can the search for answers lead to emotions of alienation and anxiety that may then be resolved (25-26).

The modern concept of identity was believed to have emerged in the West during the Protestant Reformation, and it was first expressed by the Augustinian friar Martin Luther. Luther was among the first Western intellectuals to articulate and elevate the inner self above the external social being. He maintained that since nothing external could produce Christian holiness or freedom, only the inner self could be regenerated. Man has a dual nature, he says, consisting of an inner spiritual being and an outside bodily existence. Luther in his *Christian Liberty* (1520) writes:

> Since therefore, this faith can rule only in the inner man, as Rom. 10 [:10] says, "For man believes with his heart and so is justified," and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner man. On the other hand, only

> ungodliness and unbelief of heart, and no outer work, make him guilty and a damnable servant of sin. (10)

The Catholic Church's justification for being was undercut by this recognition – which became a cornerstone of contemporary Protestant philosophy – that justification of man would result through faith alone and not from deeds. Disputing Thomas Hobbes's claim that man in the state of nature was violent, selfish and cruel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1754) makes the case that the first human being, man in his natural state, was not sinful, there was no original human society, and the only emotion that came naturally to humans was sympathy for the suffering of others:

> But it must be noted that the beginnings of Society and the relations already established among men required in them qualities different from those they derived from their primitive constitution; that, morality beginning to be introduced into human Actions, and each man, prior to Laws, being sole judge and avenger of the offenses he had received, the goodness suitable for the pure state of Nature was no longer that which suited nascent Society. (48)

Like Luther, Rousseau draws a clear line between the inner self and the external society that demands adherence to its norms. However, contrary to Luther, the ability of that inner self to experience the sentiment of '*l'existence*' free from the layers of collected social norm is what gives that person their freedom, rather than simply the ability to embrace God's grace. Thus, Rousseau's secularisation of the inner self and his elevation of it above social norms serve as a crucial foundation for the modern concept of identity.

These larger social and economic changes, in Fukuyama's words, meant that "individuals suddenly had more choice and opportunity in their lives" (36). Their constrained social options in the previous society defined who they were on the inside; as new horizons emerged, the query 'Who am I?' and perceptions of a massive gap between the inner self and outer reality suddenly became more distinct.

The mid-twentieth century saw the rise of a number of strong social movements around the world, including the civil rights movement in the United States of America, the feminist movement that fought for equal treatment between men and women, a parallel sexual movement that upended traditional perceptions of sexuality and the family, an environment movement that altered perspectives on humanity's relationship with nature, and also movements that support the rights of the disabled, immigrants, LGBTQ+ communities, and other marginalised communities. The concept of identity has been supplanted by the concept of identities under such movements, which has led to identity becoming fragments rather than being a whole. Multiplicity and pluralism are now terms associated with identity.

In the twentieth century, the concept of identity underwent a significant shift with the emergence of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the field of humanities. The 1960s have witnessed the emergence of a number of theories and discourses on identity; the influence of postmodernists and poststructuralists theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and others have developed a new understanding of the concept of identity. In the postmodern world, Stuart Hall observes that "The subject previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed not of a single, but of several sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities. . . . This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity" (276-77). The tensions and conflicts that the concept of identity encompasses are what make it vital and unavoidable. Feminism, marxism, culture studies, psychoanalysis, gay and lesbian studies, and the study of identity in postcolonial theory are some of the theories that have identified structurally comparable problems with identity. For instance, we see in psychoanaytic theory the role of a 'mirror stage' in which the subject gains identity by misrecognising himself/herself in an image. Similarly, in Louis Althusser's poststructuralist notion of interpellation where one is 'culturally interpellated' or hailed as a subject, constitutes a subject by being hailed as the occupant of a given position. In postcolonial subjectivity, we see the construction of a divided self through the clashes of opposing discourses and demands. Likewise,

in Judith Butler's work, we also understand heterosexual identity as being predicated on the suppression of the potential for homoerotic desire. The desire to destabilise, deconstruct and decentre the dominating and totalising narratives constructing the subjectivity of the individuals have been one common mechanism shared by these contemporary theories. According to Kath Woodward, "postmodernism allows the 'others' to speak, by challenging the certainty of grand narratives. . . [and] has presented troubling alternatives," and the "Poststructuralist thinking has demonstrated the limitations of dualisms and sought to indicate the complex interrelationship between some traditional binaries" (164).

Theories have shared some similarities in challenging dominating discourses which have been internalised by the individual subjects in defining and understanding their own self. Psychoanalysis sees the subject as the product of overlapping psychological, sexual, and linguistic dynamics rather than as a singular essence. According to Jacques Lacan's description of what he refers to as 'the mirror stage,' the beginning of identification occurs when the child first identifies with his or her reflection in the mirror, seeing themselves as whole and as what they wish to be:

> This act, far from exhausting itself, as in the case of the monkey, once the image has been mastered and found empty, immediately rebounds in the case of the child in a series of gestures in which he experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates – the child's own body, and the persons and things around him. (Lacan 1)

According to Lacan, the self is made up of what is reflected back, including by a mirror, the mother, and other people in general social interactions. Identity is the result of a sequence of incomplete identifications.

In feminist study, prevalent narratives regarding the construction of feminine identity have been challenged and interrogated. According to feminist theory, the subject's identity is shaped by socially imposed gender roles. And according to queer theory, the "possibility of homosexuality" is repressed in order to create the

"heterosexual subject" (Culler, *Literary Theory* 109). Butler's works have significantly influenced the way the body is conceptualised as well as how the gender/sex debate is conducted. According to her, sex is just as culturally constructed as gender (2). In this instance, the body lacks an essentially predetermined 'sex'. We only develop a gender identity through regular gender performance.

Postmodernists today are likewise sceptical of these universalising ideas, which Lyotard has referred to as 'grand narratives', and other forms of authoritarianism. They have argued against the possibility of justifying the narratives that unite disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture; "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust" (qtd. in Williams 211). Theories have instead emphasised on the fluidity of identity and unearthed the underlying structures and binaries on which the constructions of identities are anchored. Woodward in this connection argues that, "Postmodernist, poststructuralist thinking is frequently characterized by its celebration of hybridity, fluidity and contingency, arguing against the apparent rigidity and essentialism of 'roots'" (137). The modernist or liberal-humanist view of identity posits the presence of a unique, fixed, and coherent core essence that constitutes an individual's character and personality. In contrast, poststructuralist theory maintains that individuals are always subjected to cultural and discursive practices and cannot be separated from them. Judith Baxter in her paper, "Positioning Language and Identity" argues:

> Conversely [to the modernists], a poststructuralist perspective posits that individuals are never outside cultural forces or discursive practices but always 'subject' to them. Their identities are governed by a range of 'subject positions' ('ways of being'), approved by their community or culture, and made available to them by means of the particular discourses operating within a given social context. If people do not conform to these approved discourses in terms of how they speak, act and behave, they may be stigmatised by others with labels such as 'weird', 'a misfit', 'a freak' or 'an outsider'. (37)

Postmodernists and poststructuralists have a critical view of identities, seeing them as fluid and constructed rather than fixed and essential. They argue that identities are shaped by the intersection of various social, cultural, and historical factors, and are not inherent or natural. They also reject the notion of a unified self or a single, stable identity, instead seeing individuals as multiple and constantly changing. Additionally they critique the idea of essential differences between groups, such as race, gender, and sexuality, and argue that these differences are socially and culturally constructed. They also believe that all knowledge is subjective and that there is no absolute truth or objective reality. Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), for instance, argues that gender identity is not fixed or innate, but rather a performance that is repeated and reinforced through societal norms and expectations. She writes: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). This indicates that gender identity like other identities is not something that are innate and fixed, but rather something that is constructed and reinforced through our actions and interactions with others. Among the poststructuralists, Foucault was primarily preoccupied with the analysis of the nexus between power and knowledge. He delved into the intricate mechanisms through which these two entities interact and shape society. He also examined the utilisation of power and knowledge as means of exerting social control and discipline, particularly through the utilisation of institutions such as correctional facilities, healthcare establishments, and educational institutions. Furthermore, Foucault scrutinised the function of discourse in the formation of our comprehension of the world and how it perpetuates existing power structures. His chief interest "lay in unpacking the underlying structures of thinking in the various fields of knowledge because, he argued, these structures conditioned and constructed the process of inquiry. . . the very nature of the object. . . and the possibilities of using and distributing this knowledge" (Nayar 34). Foucault's conceptualisation of power posits that it is not exclusively held by any singular entity or institution, but rather is permeated throughout social relationships and interactions. He contends that power is not simply repressive in nature, but also productive, as it not only restricts certain

actions, but also actively shapes the formation of identities and the way in which individuals understand themselves and others. Through his examination of discursive practices and institutions, Foucault argues that power operates by creating and enforcing norms and knowledge, which in turn inform the construction of identity. Thus, for him, the exercise of power is intimately intertwined with the formation of identity. His conceptualisation of power can be likened to the concepts of 'ideology' and 'hegemony' in its reliance on the idea that individuals internalise and accept the power relations and norms present within society. As with Louis Althusser's ideology, power is posited to engender feelings of belonging and to have a positive impact on individuals' well-being, making it challenging to recognise and resist. This underlines the subtle and pervasive nature of power in shaping individuals' thoughts, desires and actions, and its role in forming our sense of self and understanding of the world:

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body. (Foucault 119)

Like Foucault, Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser also postulates that individuals internalise and accede to dominant ideologies and power relations, which shape their cognizance of themselves and others. In this, Althusser's concept of ideology is pivotal to his theory of how individuals are interpellated into social roles and identities by these dominant ideologies: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 109). Althusser asserts that ideology functions as a compendium of beliefs, values, and practices that individuals internalise and come to accept as axiomatic and veracious, and that these ideologies are sustained and reinforced by the state and its institutions, such as the family, education, and the media, creating a sense of 'normality' and 'naturalness' for individuals. Foucault, on the other hand,

while recognising the role of institutions in maintaining and enforcing ideologies, also emphasises the ways in which power operates through discursive practices and knowledge that shape the way individuals comprehend and make sense of the world.

Another Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony also pertains to the way in which individuals internalise and accede to dominant ideologies and power relations, shaping their cognizance of themselves and others. His notion of hegemony essentially refers to the ascendancy of one social group over others, achieved through the consensual acceptance of its values, beliefs, and practices as natural and legitimate. His concept of hegemony "related the 'whole social process' to structures of power and influence and thus to patterns of domination, subordination and opposition" (Selden et al. 100). Gramsci posits that hegemony is "not [attained] through coercion but [rather] through consent," (Nayar 131) the active participation and consent of subordinate groups, who come to embrace the dominant group's values and beliefs as their own:

> The maximum of legislative capacity can be inferred when a perfect formulation of directives is matched by a perfect arrangement of the organisms of execution and verification, and by a perfect preparation of the "spontaneous" consent of the masses who must "live" those directives, modifying their own habits, their own will, their own convictions to conform with those directives and with the objectives which they propose to achieve. (Gramsci, 266)

This highlights the ways in which Gramsci's theory of hegemony addresses the formation of individual identity by emphasizing the ways in which dominant ideologies and power relations shape individuals' thoughts, desires, and actions. He contends that individuals internalise these dominant ideologies, becoming active agents in their own oppression, rather than merely passive victims. Moreover, Gramsci's theory of hegemony also examines power relations in society by analysing how dominant groups sustain and reproduce their dominance through the manipulation of culture, education, and the media. He argues that dominant groups utilise these institutions to create a cultural hegemony, which justifies and legitimises

their rule, and creates a sense of ‘common sense’ that is accepted by subordinate groups.

This desire of unearthing the underlying structures and totalising discourses constructing the understanding of identity is pivotal in the study of literature especially in the mid-twentieth century. According to Hans Bertens, the impulse for cultural self-determination, or cultural autonomy, is a driving force behind the literature that emerged in the former colonies during the 1960s and 1970s. Notable examples of such literature include works by Wilson Harris (Guyana), Yambo Ouologuem (Mali, a former French colony), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria, Nobel Prize in Literature laureate in 1986), Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia, Nobel Prize in Literature laureate in 1992) and a “whole range of other writers create novels and poems that respond to, and reflect, their immediate cultural environment” (194). In postcolonial study, theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have concepts that possess affinities to Gramsci's hegemony, Foucault’s concept of discourse, and Althusser’s ideology. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) has developed the concept of ‘cultural imperialism’ in which Said contends that the West has imposed its own values, beliefs, and practices on the East through a process of cultural imperialism, creating a dominant narrative that justifies and legitimises Western rule. This mirrors Gramsci's concept of how a dominant group maintains and reproduces its dominance through the manipulation of culture, education, and the media. Said posits that the representation of the East played a crucial role in the conquest of the East; the epistemological dominance exerted over the East through the documentation and archival of knowledge enabled Europe to acquire and maintain power. In other words, the discourses that constructed the Orient in specific ways facilitated the exertion of political and military control by Europe over the indigenous peoples. He writes:

> Much of the information and knowledge about Islam and the Orient that was used by the colonial powers to justify their colonialism derived from Orientalist scholarship: a recent study by many contributors . . . demonstrates with copious documentation how Orientalist knowledge was used in the

> colonial administration of South Asia. A fairly consistent interchange still continues between area scholars, such as Orientalists, and government departments of foreign affairs. (345)

Frantz Fanon, in his 1952 book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, has developed the concept of the 'colonised subject' which echoes Althusser's concept of ideology. Fanon argues that the colonised subject internalizes the dominant ideologies of the coloniser and comes to accept them as natural and true, similar to Althusser's theory of how individuals are interpellated into social roles and identities by dominant ideologies. Fanon contends that colonialism had a devastating effect on the psyche of the oppressed and afflicted native. The persistent portrayal of the native as a subhuman, animalistic 'other' by the colonial master leads to the obliteration of the native's identity. Additionally, Fanon posits that when the coloniser characterises the native as morally depraved, pagan and uncivilised, over time, the native begins to internalise this prejudiced and racialised perspective as fact. As a result, the black man loses his sense of self and identity, as he can only perceive himself through the lens of the white coloniser:

> The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (Fanon 83)

In this way Fanon rejected the foundational tenets of colonial ethno-psychiatric paradigms, which were predicated on essentialist notions. He meticulously deconstructed the notion of the 'native' as a fixed and immutable category, and instead posited that the "mental deformations" exhibited by patients in "Algerian psychiatric wards" were a direct corollary of the racist policies implemented by the colonial administration (Ashcroft et al. 84).

Another leading voice in postcolonial analysis of the process of interpellating the native subject is an Indian postcolonial critic, Homi K. Bhabha. Through his

works, Bhabha highlights the ways in which colonial discourse, which sought to establish a one-way flow of power from coloniser to colonised and impose a uniform structure, was frequently ineffective in achieving its objectives (Nayar 168). Bhabha, in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994), posits that colonial power operates not only through overt forms of coercion, but also through subtle forms of manipulation and persuasion that shape the identities of colonised subjects. He also argues that colonised subjects create new identities through the process of 'hybridization', a process of blending and negotiation between different cultures. He argues that colonial and postcolonial subjects inhabit a space 'in-between' cultures and that this 'in-between' space creates a hybrid identity that is neither fully one thing nor the other, but rather a combination of different cultural influences. Bhabha's ideas about hybridity highlight the ways in which colonialism and postcolonialism have produced new cultural forms and identities that cannot be reduced to the cultures they emerge from:

> These spheres of life are linked through an 'in-·, between' temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which like the coloured South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive 'image' at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world. (Bhabha 13)

By 'aesthetic distance' Bhabha refers to the gap or space between a cultural representation (such as literature, film, or art) and the reality it represents. Bhabha argues that this distance creates a 'double edge' in narratives, as it allows for both reflection and critique of dominant cultural norms and representations. His theorisation of aesthetic distance and hybridity serves to underscore the profound impact that cultural representations have on shaping our perception of reality and the experiences and identities of colonial and postcolonial subjects. Furthermore, his work draws attention to the necessary examination of power dynamics inherent in the

production and dissemination of cultural representations and the formation of cultural forms.

Another Indian theorist and critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, too, in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) has developed the concept of 'subalternity' which echoes Gramsci's concept of hegemony in that it deals with the ways in which marginalised groups are oppressed and dominated by dominant groups and also the ways in which they internalise and accept these power relations. Spivak's concept of subalternity refers to the condition of the marginalised and oppressed groups, particularly the colonised and subaltern, who are denied a voice and agency in the political and social spheres. She argues that these groups are denied access to the dominant discourse, and their perspectives and experiences are silenced and erased by the dominant narratives. Spivak's central idea is that "subjects are constituted through discourse. . . [and this discourse is] a regime of representation that is controlled by power" (Nayar 171).

In her work, Spivak often critiques the ways in which the subaltern is constructed as an object or subject of dominant discourses, rather than as an active agent. She argues that the subaltern is often represented in ways that reinforce the power of the dominant group, rather than giving voice to the subaltern's own experiences and perspectives.

Thus, the emergence of contemporary theories in the mid-twentieth century has exerted a pivotal influence in shaping the discourse surrounding identity in academia and literature. These groundbreaking theories have challenged and interrogated the conventional essentialist notion of identity as rigid and unchanging, offering a paradigm shift and presenting a more fluid and dynamic understanding of how identity is intricately influenced by a myriad of intersecting and interdependent factors.

Because literature provides ample materials for challenging political and sociological interpretations of the significance of such aspects in identity construction, there has been a recent ignition of theorising gender, race and sexuality in the area of literary studies. "Literature has not only made identity a theme," but it

has also significantly influenced “in the construction of the identity of the readers” (Culler 112). Literature has traditionally been valued for the fictitious experiences it allows readers to have, allowing them to understand how it feels to be in specific circumstances and thereby developing “dispositions to act and feel in certain ways” (Culler 112). By portraying events from the perspective of the characters, literary works develop character identification.

In recent years, a substantial body of literature composed in the English language has emerged from the northeastern region of India. A majority of writers from this region have been educated in English-medium schools, and have chosen to articulate themselves through the medium of English, rather than their native languages. Additionally, some writers hail from communities that lack a written tradition of their own, making English a facilitator for their literary expression. Despite the reservations of writers of regional languages within the region concerning the use of English as a medium of literary expression, it is indisputable that English-language writers possess the capacity to effectively convey their sense of rootedness and intrinsic cultural and traditional practices, as well as to depict the unique and pressing issues that are salient to their communities.

It is essential to acknowledge that while these writers, who are dispersed throughout the northeastern region, have been educated in institutions utilising the English medium, this should not be construed as a blanket characterisation for all writers from this region who have chosen to write in the English language. There are certain writers of regional languages within the northeastern region who express reservations regarding authors of English who are drawn from communities that primarily maintain an oral tradition. These writers contend that the accurate and proper representation of such literature in the English language is unfeasible. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that there are cultures and writers from these cultures who have successfully risen to the challenge of effectively representing their oral traditions through the medium of English. In this case, Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) serves as a noteworthy exemplar of the author’s proficiency in conveying the rich oral tradition of their tribe into the English language.

It is a self-evident fact that every tribe, caste, group, or community residing within the northeastern region, whether in the mountainous or lowland areas, harbours a rich culture that is firmly entrenched in their unique customs and traditions. Each poet and writer from this region is imbued with a distinct individuality and perspective. They all employ the English language in a manner that is tailored to their individual needs and purposes. The oral storytelling tradition, which is a feature of the cultures of indigenous peoples, has been creatively incorporated into the literary productions of contemporary authors who hail from such tribes, but have preferred to write in the English language. Through this transition from oral to written form, these writers have sought to confer a sense of permanence upon the fluid narrations that are characteristic of oral literature. For writers such as Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, the decision to compose literature in the English language represented a significant departure from tradition. Conversely, states such as Manipur and Assam have long possessed a rich literary heritage. According to Priyanka Kakoti, despite the striking variations in tone, style, and themes, it becomes apparent that there exists a common thread linking the works of Mamang Dai's *The Legends of the Pensam*, Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010), Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* (2005), Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2005), or Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), which is that each literary work is deeply rooted in its respective state (22). Kakoti also argues that, in sharp contrast to literature in English from other regions of the country, writing in English from the northeastern Region is characterised by a distinct local flavour. Whereas literary works from other regions of the country tend to focus on urban themes, writing from the northeast is deeply imbued with the customs and traditions of the past. She writes:

> While writings in English from other parts of the country have urban concerns that are valid in themselves, English writing from the Northeast has strong links with the customs of the past. It is noteworthy that despite their rootedness in a particular location, these writings also have a universal appeal. (24)

In the post-independence period, a proliferation of counter-narratives emerged that sought to re-conceptualise and re-articulate notions of identity and authenticity through the lens of incisive and impactful discursive frameworks. These counter-narratives posed a formidable challenge to the dominant official nationalist discourse by presenting alternative ideological orientations and fundamentally reconfiguring the dominant narrative. Nationalist discourse is founded on the principle of exclusion, as noted by Munasinghe (155), whereas liminal narratives emphasise the marginalised 'otherness' that has been relegated to the periphery of the dominant discourse. In this context, literature from northeast India emerges as a potent form of counter-narrative that challenges the complacent belief of mainland India in asserting its perceived superiority over the peripheries. The northeast states have maintained a strained relationship with the Hindi heartland of India and have frequently been deliberately omitted from the representation of mainstream Indian culture (Varghese 2). The literature originating from the northeast region has experienced a resurgence in recent times and has distanced itself from the themes that are central to the dominant official canon. While aggregating the individual literary narratives of the various states under the umbrella of northeast literature might be an oversimplification, such an approach has been embraced by some critics due to the existence of overarching themes and motifs that reflect a shared cultural history. Varghese, arguing about the shared cultural history reflected in the writings from northeast India writes:

> The precolonial oral narratives of the various tribes celebrated the unique and dynamic nature of the region. The Ahom dynasty in Assam nurtured a rich literary tradition and the invaluable Meitei scripts of precolonial Manipur reveal a heritage that is impressively expansive in its scope and design. The colonial need to homogenise the Northeast was an extremely complex process that shaped the later literary traditions of the region, with regard to its linguistic, cultural and political tangent. (2)

Writings from the northeast began to emerge and acquire visibility only in the recent decades. The initial flourishing of Indian English fiction, dating back to the 1930s, and the seminal impact of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) in

the 1980s did not significantly influence or have a major bearing on the literary production of the northeastern region. Therefore, it is necessary to examine this body of literature, written in English though it may be, from a different perspectives altogether. In recent decades, particularly from the early 2000s onwards, there has been a notable emergence of literature from the northeastern region. The term 'emerging' is frequently utilised in discussions regarding this body of literature, which encompasses works written in both English and various vernacular languages. This period has also seen a proliferation of translated works from the northeastern region. Many critics and writers from the northeast region are of the opinion that these last few decades have been instrumental in making these works accessible to a global audience for the first time. In the context of the absence of authentic histories of most communities in the northeast, creative writers have assumed the role of cultural historians by presenting alternate histories through their fictional narratives. Consequently, fictional narratives produced by the writers from this region are frequently regarded as an alternative form of historical representation.

The contemporary narratives of the northeast region, thus, vehemently emphasised the distinct historical and cultural identity of the region; it is now distinguished by its powerful evocation of culturally distinct elements, maintaining its distinctiveness within the pluralistic narrative of modern India.

The contemporary stories and poems originating from this region largely depict the lived experiences of its people, encompassing their daily activities and the prevailing socio-political phenomena in the northeastern state of India. They depict in their stories and poems, themes such as insurgency, memory, interethnic violence, self-identity, nationhood, corruption, the ecology of the area, and the mundane existence of the common people. Insurgency constitutes a prominent theme in numerous literary works from the northeastern region of India, perhaps owing to the region's protracted history of conflict and insurgency:

> Almost all the eight states face the problem of insurgency, with more than fifty insurgent groups operating in these states, which together has a population of 3.85 crore, according to the 2001 census – about 3.75 per cent

> of the total population of the country. Thus, today for the common people in the region, life is an everyday existential crisis, caught as they are in the crossfire between the insurgents, the government's counter-insurgency operations and the resultant vicious circle of insecurity, vulnerability, hopelessness, death and violence in addition to the ever-present problems of corruption, poverty and unemployment. (Zama 9)

The post-Independence era marked a heightened awareness of ethnic identity and nationality among the northeastern population of India. This was likely due to various factors, including economic exploitation, native alienation from their ancestral lands, cultural and demographic assimilation, political and economic control by the newly established authority, and accelerated immigration to tribal territories. In the words of Kailash C. Baral, "endemic militancy . . . looks on the face and challenges this culture of Northeast. . ." and the violence that stalks this region "is part of the everyday life of the people" (x). Robin S. Ngangom also asserts that the experiences of violence and conflict encountered by writers from the northeastern region of India differentiate them significantly from their mainland counterparts:

> The writers from Northeast India, consequently, differs from his counterpart in the mainland in a significant way. While it may not make him a better writer, living in the menace of the gun he cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or wooly aesthetics but must perforce master 'the art of witness'. . . We have witnessed growing ethnic aggressiveness, secessionist ventures, cultural and religious bigotry, the marginalization of the minorities and the poor, profit and power struggles in government, and as a natural aftermath to these, the banality of corruption and the banality of terror. . . Hardly anyone writes romantic verse or talks about disturbing sexuality because they are absorbed in writing the poetry of survival. (49-50)

Thus, the literature produced in this region serves as a means of conveying and depicting the experiences and realities of insurgency, as well as the daily struggles of its people. This idea aligns with Bhabha's perspective that world literature should be

studied in the context of historical trauma, "a focus on. . . the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical past" (12). Through the use of fictional narratives, writers from the northeast are able to explore a broader range of themes and perspectives that may be difficult to convey through non-fictional forms.

As a region, the northeastern states have undergone a plethora of experiences, both positive and negative. It thus falls upon the shoulders of creative writers to skillfully articulate these experiences through the medium of language. Notably, there have been instances of trauma within the region, and the literary works produced by writers hailing from the northeastern states have effectively portrayed these tumultuous episodes. Other than violence and trauma, the works of various creative writers from the region, such as Temsula Ao, Anjum Hasan, Siddharth Deb, Janice Pariat, Easterine Iralu, Malsawmi Jacob, Jahnavi Barua, Mitra Phukan, Nandakumar Debbarma, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and Sudhanya Tripura, among others, adeptly convey the theme of their love for the natural landscapes and culture, and flora and fauna of the region.

Literature originating from the northeastern region of India is frequently characterised as a literature of conflict, owing to the prolonged and ongoing conflicts, ethnic strife, and insurgent movements that have plagued the region for decades. However, as Rini Barman observes in her article, "The Mythopoeic in Contemporary Northeast Indian Poetry," it would be reductive to categorise the literature of the region solely as literature of conflict, as the writers of the region address a diverse range of themes beyond the realm of violence and conflict:

> That literature from the Northeast is conflict literature is a huge myth because these poets writing in English share the romanticism and mytho-poetic vision of their vernacular counterparts both past and present. The common bond of poetic sensibility is predominated by love for the land, nature, myths, narrative tribal folklore. The universal coherence of these poets gets reflected in their love for the land and the love of humanity which coalesce into surreal images. (Barman)

Further explaining why the literature produced in this part of the country has been classified as literature of conflict by the dominant discourse, Rini postulates:

> Some writers and poets however feel that they need to write about conflict because the national media and the mainstream haven't spoken about it with empathy. However, that doesn't mean that the only stories from Northeast are about conflict, the subterranean tales are never brought to the focus of academic syllabi, just as there are stories of floods and terror, there are also stories of love and peace. (Barman)

Therefore, it is highly fallacious to categorise literature from this region under a single, monolithic label. Similarly to how northeast India is stereotypically perceived as a homogenous entity, it is also stereotypical to assume that literature from this region is exclusively focused on themes of conflict, insurgency, as well as the psychological trauma experienced survivors. The literary works, whether in regional languages or English, produced by authors from this region, demonstrate a profound connection to nature. Through their use of imaginative and creative language, they have skillfully depicted the picturesque landscape, the lush forests and diverse flora, the enigmatic mountainous regions, the alluring jhum fields, and the captivating rivers. Their love for the land, their myths, and folklore, as well as their recognition of the loss of cultural identity under the influence of modern political forces, serves as a unifying aspect of their poetic sensibility.

In a December 2004 interview with *Poetry International Web* titled "The Thud of Boots and the Odour of Gunpowder", celebrated poet and scholar Chandrakanta Murasingh from Tripura offers insight on the similarities in poetry from the northeast region:

> Though the Northeast is known as 'the seven-sister states', yet we do not know each other all that well. . . . Yes, some similarities in the poetry are definitely seen. This is because of the similarities in the landscape and the contemporary situation. The neglect of the region by successive governments seems to be unending. . . . Because of this continuing neglect there is now an

> identity crisis, resulting in unrest. . . . In the poetry we hear the shrieks of the victims caught in this vicious conflict.
>
> As the poetry here develops in the lap of hills and descends from there in a cascade of rhythm, it retains its own identity. It has not wandered off like a fleeting cloud. The face of time has been engraved on the poetry of the Northeast. This is what simultaneously binds the Northeast poets together and differentiates them from each other. (Murasingh)

Poets from the northeast region, such as Nandakumar Debbarma, Chandrakanta Murasingh, Mamang Dai, Estherine Kire, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond Leslie Kharmawphlang, Temsula Ao, among others, employ their literary works to express their profound reverence for the land and their intimate relationship with nature. For instance, in her poem "In An Obscure Place", celebrated poet Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, portrays the mountains as an all-knowing entity, as they are aware of all that has occurred, is occurring, and will occur among the hill people (Vohra 45-54). This theme is exemplified in Mamang Dai's poetry:

> There are mountains. Oh! There are mountains.
>
> We climbed every slope. We slept by the river
>
> But do not speak of victory yet. (88-89)

The initial lines of the poem convey the poet's personal connection to the mountains, which are ingrained in her memory. The memory of the mountains and their physical presence serve as a link between the past, present, and future. The inhabitants of this region do not evaluate their connection to the land in terms of self-aggrandisement, victory, or triumph, as opposed to foreign invaders. A place that is considered home evokes feelings of warmth and affection.

Similarly, the poetry of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a poet from Shillong, is replete with imagery of his beloved homeland. His affection for Cherrapunjee and its natural splendor is reflected in the following lines:

Cherra, dear Meikha,

Crowds have sung for you,

Competing Sunday bells

Tolling abroad your pulchritude

Those foamy-white cascading ornaments,

Your roaring falls;

those leafy green dresses

your musical forests. (20)

Nandakumar Debbarma, a poet from Tripura, in his expressive Kokborok lyrics, "A House by the Riverside", also makes a subtle comparison between human impermanence and the eternal flow of rivers in the last four lines of the poem:

Because the poet is a man, he dies.

Often he will be murdered. Then Hwangho, Mekong and

Gomatee will gush a collective wail,

Causing a new river island to grow for human habitation. (101)

The poem implies that the collective experiences of suffering, such as death, murder, and trauma, remembered through time, will serve as a new marker of identity for future generations. It also suggests that the memory of these collective experiences will historically serve as a marker of identity for the people. The rivers in this context, once again represent the land of the Boroks.

According to Kakoti, the literary works produced in English from the northeastern region hold a significant implication in their ability to transcend the boundaries of ethnicity and identity. Such works do not merely function as representative voices of specific communities, but also serve to embody a shared historical narrative:

> They tend to represent the collective memory of a region. They form a body of writing that does not wish to be amalgamated into the wider genre of Indian writings in English. Rather these writers in English from the Northeast have formed a different canon of their own. This is a resistance, a way by which the periphery answers back to the centre. Since, the mainland's depictions of the Northeast have never outgrown the constructs of the "mysterious other," the Northeast feels that it needs to speak for and about itself. (28)

In this regard, Margaret Ch. Zama in her analysis of the literatures from the northeast also observes:

> Emerging literatures from the Northeast region, having undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization, registers various voices that need to be heard and understood in the context of India's multicultural mosaic. (xi)

In many aspects, the contemporary poems and stories that originated in India's northeastern area share comparable themes that became a part of the nationalist agenda of identity-assertion. After print culture was introduced to northeast India during the colonial era, according to Tilottoma Misra, "collecting, re-telling, and printing the folklore of the different communities became an important part of the colonial ethnographic agenda of mapping the region for more effective administrative control over the bewildering variety of races that the British encountered," (xvii). In contrast, their culture and heritage were misrepresented and marginalised as a result. These people, "whose history and civilization had been pushed to the margins as not conforming to the norms of the Eurocentric concept of modernity, took up the task of re-creating their past and re-inventing tradition so as to represent the present as a stage in the continuous process of marching from the past to the future" (Misra xvii). Thus, for them, collecting and publishing their own oral and written literature became a component of the nationalist agenda of identity-assertion.

This technique of consciously incorporating aspects of one's oral tradition into new works of literature in order to rewrite and reinvent one's own history and culture is becoming more and more widespread all over the world, and it is also practiced by some communities in African nations. Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian author, for instance, focuses on incorporating traditional rites and rituals, myths and the vibrant African storytelling tradition, as well as ancient gods and goddesses, into his narrative in his novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe claims that African literature should be described as having "the complexities of the African scene" otherwise it is "doomed to failure" in his 1964 article "The African writer and the English Language" (75). Similarly, his primary objective in writing this novel was to develop an anti-orientalist discourse which will accurately depict the pre-colonial Igbo lives. This rewriting of ethnic history has become more urgent in the case of the northeastern Indian people because the "Sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era" (Misra xviii). Numerous regional literature have also addressed the impacts of globalisation and mass culture, together with the invasion of a foreign culture that brought about progression and modernity and forced indigenous people to renounce some aspects of their own culture.

The writer under analysis in this study, Janice Pariat, manifests diverse thematic agendas in her fictional oeuvre. A prominent focal point in her works lies in the exploration of personal and cultural identity. Pariat delves into the intricacies surrounding individual identities and their intricate formation under the influence of multifarious factors such as heritage, history, and sociocultural contexts. Employing skillful narrative techniques, Pariat deftly captures the arduous quest for a sense of belonging and the inherent tension between tradition and modernity.

Unlike certain regional writers hailing from northeast India, Pariat surpasses the confines of local influences by incorporating an international dimension into her exploration of the complexities of personal identities. For instance, while her collection of stories, *Boats on Land* (2012), predominantly concentrates on delving into myths, history, and cultural heritage of the Khasi community, and also into

exploring ethnic and cultural identity, as well as the intricate interplay between identity politics and ethnic conflicts within the context of northeastern India, her novel *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017) penetrates the subjective nature of memory and its profound impact on our self-perception and understanding of the surrounding world. In this narrative, she navigates the realm of nostalgia, showcasing the fragmentary, reconstructive, and at times distorted nature of memory.

Moreover, Pariat's debut novel, *Seahorse* (2014), ventures into the complexities of sexual identity, challenging the entrenched notions of heteronormativity and the traditional essentialist concept of identity as unchanging and fixed. Expanding her thematic spectrum, Pariat deftly incorporates themes of love, loss, and longing, delving into the intricate nuances of human relationships and the intricate emotional landscapes of her characters. Through her characters, she portrays the profound yearning for connection and intimacy, further illuminating the manifold ways in which human emotions shape our experiences and interactions. In addition, Pariat consistently engages with socio-political issues (as seen in *Boats on Land*), deftly touching upon themes of gender, power dynamics, and social injustices (as seen in *Seahorse* and *The Nine-Chambered Heart*). Her works provide incisive and critical commentary on prevailing societal norms, challenging established structures while advocating for greater equality and comprehension. Her fictional corpus serves as an invitation for readers to embark on an introspective journey, contemplating profound questions of identity, memory, relationships, and societal dynamics.

## Note

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# CHAPTER THREE

# MYTH AND IDENTITY

The postcolonial fictional narratives and poems emerging from northeast India have the tradition of employing the oral tradition of the societies. This employment of myths and oral narrative techniques in literature is initially more of a reaction to a specific historical moment than just an expression of cultural tradition. This historical moment is colonialism that sets its foot on northeastern Indian soil in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. Most contemporary writers from this region have voiced their concern for cultural re-juvenation through a constant initiative of going back to the pre-colonial roots by nurturing a multi-dimensional discourse in their works. This includes employing belief systems, oral narrative traditions, and community-engaged practices. Mamang Dai's *The Legend of Pensam* (2006), for example, is basically a recounting of legends, rituals, myths, and customs of the Adi tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai's stories gave a new life to the pre-colonial world of the Adi tribe and brought to light a new understanding of the life and experiences of the indigenous tribes. The Borok poets from Tripura, such as Nandakumar Debbarma, Shefali Debbarma, and Sudhanya Tripura, employ their creativity to reclaim their lost heritage by drawing on their myths and folktales. In doing so, they challenge the stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream literature and seek to redefine their own identity. By continuously depicting the enduring values present in their everyday lives, these poets aim to defy the constructed biases against their culture. Their retelling of myths and legends in the form of fictional narratives and poems can be seen as a form of myth-making driven by our inherent need for storytelling in a world increasingly influenced by science and technology. This process reflects our changing perspectives and experiences as we strive to demystify and understand our existence in new ways. In consideration of literary scholarship emerging from the region, it is imperative to acknowledge that such discourse is not solely confined to a limiting narrative of violence. Instead, it manifests an embodied sense of communal cultural authenticity, evident in its oral narrative expressions, which are deeply entangled with both historical and fictitious elements. The nuanced interplay between these divergent realms yields a hybridity of forms and meanings that resists any singular, stable reading. Indeed, it is this ambivalent, liminal quality

of the region's literary production that renders it a site of fertile creativity, constantly negotiating its boundaries and reconfiguring the terms of its engagement with the world beyond.

This aspect of myths and folklore being reflected in the literature of the colonised has also been perceived as an integral method of decolonisation. It can also be perceived as a "medium of self-assertion and an expression of identity rather than a static component of a specific national culture" (al-Shwillay 12). According to Dorothy Noyes, "Folklore [and myths] is that part of culture that marks cultural practices of modern societies in connection to its past" (375). In the twentieth-century postcolonial literatures, "myth is a framing device that interrogates particular socio-cultural and historical moments" (1), and emplyoing it in fictional narratives is a crucial component in the perceived recuperation from the colonised imaginary. According to Joseph Campbell, there are different myths in every community. All myths are validated by decades and centuries of experience thereby providing a model to emulate. Myth provides a field where one can locate oneself. Myths direct us from the phenomenal world to the transcendent. According to him, myths have four main functions in a community: "The first function of a living mythology is to reconcile consciousness to the preconditions of its own existences; that is to say, to the nature of life" (3). For folklorist Alan Dundes, folklore acts as a mirror of culture in the sense that it informs about the cultural and historical experiences of the people and may also be regarded as a fair self-expression of the people. Dundes writes:

> For folklore is autobiographical ethnography—that is, it is a people's own description of themselves. This is in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists. It may be that there is distortion in a people's self image as it is expressed in that people's songs, proverbs, and the like, but one must admit that there is often as much, if not more, distortion in the supposedly objective descriptions made by professional social scientists who in fact see the culture under study through the culturally relative and culturally determined categories of their own culture. Moreover, even the distortion in a

> people's self image can tell the trained observer something about that people's values. (55)

Pariat's stories in her collection, *Boats on Land*, reflect the experiences of the Khasi community through different stages of their history: the colonial, post-colonial, and modern periods. It also explores the myths and belief systems of the Khasis, and her narratives interweave the apparent reality of life with the folkloric and the mundane with the surreal. The co-existence of different realities in the Khasi society and the experiences of the tribe throughout history have been portrayed and recalled in her stories. Pariat, by creatively referring to the Khasi myths, strives to revive the pre-modern world, and through her conscious depiction of certain enduring values lived in their everyday life, her stories try to reclaim identity and further challenge all stereotypes constructed by mainstream literature.

Pariat's stories may be regarded as realist fiction since they capture the lived experiences of the predominantly oral culture of the indigenous Khasis rather than trying to represent it in terms of the Western written tradition. Her stories significantly subvert the chirographic structures of representation that endorse the Western civilising and economic agendas. Instead it portrays the Khasis' lived experience by asserting their pre-colonial cultural values. With the style, characterisation, and narrative structure being in congruence with the nature of the culture represented, Pariat's stories are able to vividly depict the picture of an oral society through her narrative style. In her collection, *Boats on Land*, she develops her own 'Khasi vernacular style', which is mainly anchored on the distinctive use of proverbs/myths and indigenous belief systems which are not limited only to dialogues. The narratives dotted with some aspects of cultural beliefs evoke the cultural milieu and also help in accounting for the cultural and historical authenticity of the stories. In Pariat's stories, it is evident that old sayings and other cultural beliefs are essential components of Khasi's linguistic features. She used it to render specific effects like helping define her characters, clarifying issues not openly stated, and enriching dialogues. For example, in the story "A Waterfall of Horses," when the village council meets in Mama Sain's hut and gathers around the hearth, close to the

ember, there is a wooden *thlong*, a vessel, which is filled with water. It is the common belief of the indigenous people that this *thlong* "could predict the future – the higher the water level, the better the harvest" (Pariat, "A Waterfall of Horses" 10). At the end of the story, when the harvest fails yearly in Pomreng village, it is seen that the water in the *thlong* "hardly rose halfway up in thlong" (18). Elements of cultural belief also play an essential role in the development of the plot in "At Kut Madan." When Lucy, the main protagonist of the story, tells Doctor Wallang of her strange dreams, to appease her, Doctor Wallang replies:

> I have seen people who are deeply unhappy. And within this emptiness, many demons may reside. Like creatures in the hollow of a tree. I don't know if the demons come from outside or within. . . . But if you dream of loved ones who are no more, the Khasis say they come to visit you. (32)

Lucy's friend, Knytang, a local boy, on the other hand, told Lucy that "here [Meghalaya] dreams are as important as waking life" (32). The story's climax thus reveals the connection between Lucy's dreams (of the golden eggs and firebirds) and the aircraft accident near the village.

In the story "Echo Words," the myth of *nongshohnoh* (hired kidnappers) and the *Thlen* (an evil spirit in the form of a serpent) remains pivotal in the development of the story. According to Khasi belief, the *nongshohnoh* is a person hired by some *kur* or families which offer human sacrifice to some evil spirit in the form of a serpent, the *Thlen*, for their economic prosperity. In the Khasi legends, the *Thlen* is the bastard son of Ka Kma Kharai, daughter of the chief god around Mawsmai, U Mawlong Syiem, who was at first a man-eating creature living in the wilderness of Sohra. However, answering men's plea for help in ending the savagery and ruthless slaughter of the *Thlen*, Suidoh, a guardian spirit – whose primary duty was to restore men's health and virtue – killed him. The *Thlen* later resurrected again through a piece of flesh (of the *Thlen*, which the locals feasted) kept back by an older woman. He then transformed himself into a blood-sucking creature. Since then, the *Thlen* promised riches to his keeper, and the keeper, in return, hired some desperate kidnappers or *nongsohnoh* who would kill for money and bring back the victim's

blood. This is how the myth of *nongsohnoh* and *Thlen* developed. Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, in talking about this myth, argues that many people in the region still believe in the existence of this myth. He writes:

> The legend of U Thlen, swallower of humans, is a living one, and to this day, people talk about this man-eating, blood-sucking serpent as they would talk of the plague, cancer, tuberculosis or any other killer disease, for that is what this monster represents now: the cause of a deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, and grows thin and weak, with his face and belly bloated. They say the keepers. . . and the killers. . . are still very active in some parts of the Khasi Hills. (64)

It is also believed that the keepers tried to keep the *Thlen* always happy by offering blood as a sacrifice, or when there was a scarcity of blood, they would offer the sacrifices in the form of hair or a piece of cloth cut from the victims. This hair and cloth, then, would be converted by the *Thlen* "into the image of a particular victim, which would be made to dance on a silver plate to the eerie," and at the "end of this evil ritual, the serpent would feast a little on the image, starting from the feet upwards" (Nongkynrih 64). This ritual would continue for some time, and when nothing is left of the image, the victim (the real person), who would have been suffering or having an illness all this time, would eventually die. In the story, when the French lady and Malcolm disappeared, the locals believe that the wife's (of Malcom) family, the Rynjahs, has devised a plan to use old mantras and capture them for sacrifice:

> The vegetable seller whispered that old mantras worked even from great distances; as long as Kong Banri was in possession of something that belonged to the lovers, she could still do them harm. (Pariat, "Echo Words" 56)

At the end of the story, we see that the lovers are not dead, but some illness indeed clutches them. The mantras must have worked, or it might have been coincidental:

> We never saw the French lady again. Once, I asked Malcolm about her, and he gave me a vague answer saying that on their travels she'd fallen mysteriously ill with a fever that seemed to slowly suck away her strength and colour. (60)

The myth of *puri* or water fairy also plays a central role in the story's development in "Dream of the Golden Mahseer." In the story, when Mama Kyn disappeared and was found seated on a rock by the Wah Dieng Doh waterfall, the locals believe that he is under the possession of some kind of water fairy called the *puri*:

> 'lah kem puri,' I heard people whisper around me, but I didn't know what that meant. 'It'll never stop now,' someone added, and they all shook their heads sadly. (Pariat 73)

When a group of young men from the locality brings him down, Mama Kyn was very weak, and he did not fight. It is the traditional belief of the Khasi that the "puris trap men and take them away to their dwelling places underwater" (Pariat, "Dream of the Golden" 74). However, for people like Uncle Gordon, this is simply an old belief of some superstitious folks. Moreover, there are people like Mena and some other town folks who still believe in the myth of the *puris*. They believe that when someone is under the spell of the *puri*, there is no getting out of the spell:

> [Mena:] 'She must have followed him home from the river. Once that happens, he'll always be under her spell. . . The mischievous ones are alright, they don't do much harm, they tempt and tease and only visit the men at night. . . . But, the malicious ones, they're very dangerous. . . . They lead men to dangerous places, to cliffs and waterfalls, to whirlpools and deep lakes. I've heard they're persistent, and will do anything to lure them into the water. (74-75)

It is also believed that the only way to break the spell is that the man under her spell must leave a broom upside down outside his door every day. So, when Mama Kyn disappeared for the fourth time, a broom was placed near his door.

However, when he vanished for the last time, it is understood that the night before his disappearance, the broom was removed by someone. As Mama Kyn disclosed to the narrator about what he saw during his disappearance, he says that he was "catching Golden Mahseer. . . [that are] all around [him]. . . flying through the air, leaping into the water" (Pariat, "Dream of the Golden" 76).

Even with the coming of Christianity and modern science, many people still believe in the existence of the non-human entity. Furthermore, in the traditional Khasi world, possession by water fairies or *puris* is a well-known occurrence. In the East Khasi Hills, *puris* are mostly regarded as a non-human feminine spirit that possesses excellent beauty and long black hair and is believed to have the power to seduce men who like to go fishing. However, in the West Khasi Hills, North Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills, these spirits are narrated differently and are seen as having ambivalent status in the community. Margaret Lyngdoh, in her article, "Water Spirit Possession among the Khasis: Representation of Fear through Narratives," explains the traditional beliefs of the Khasis towards the *puris*:

> A *puri* is always a malignant entity and is believed to lead a human being to madness and death. They are said to appear as ethereally beautiful men and women who like to have mortals as their spouses. If a person is adequately enchanted (*ngat puri*) by a puri, they must die so their *rngiew* can go to an alternate reality to be with their *puri* wife/husband. The symptoms that indicate that a puri has really enchanted a person are that such a person will frequent the body of water where their spirit woman/man resides. Sometimes, the person will disappear for days together, only to be found weak and delirious near the water. Sometimes, madness follows, in which state the affected person will call out the name of the body of water where their spirit wife or husband lives. *Puri*s are water non-humans and their connection with water locates them in the greater folklore associated with water. Their desire to associate with humans, to have spirit children with them, or to impart healing knowledge to them (in the West Khasi Hills), makes them part of the liminal ontologies. (85-86)

Myth and cultural beliefs thus contribute significantly not only to the content but also to the form of the stories. In Pariat's stories, they not only develop the plot and theme of the stories but also add some flavour to her dialogues and characterisation. The frequent use of native words also adds some indigenous flavour to her narratives. This act of subversion and appropriation remains instrumental in asserting one's cultural identity in the face of authority and misrepresentation. In postcolonial literature, this strategy, known as 'appropriation' or 'indigenisation', involves using colonial linguistic and literary tools to create alternative truths and challenge dominant narratives. Appropriating the colonial language, its discursive form and mode of representation, some postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe has been able to intervene in the dominant discourse and represent their own cultural experiences and realities to wider readers. Pariat's choice of words and style gives life to the indigenous sentiments and experiences and acts as a significant tool in redressing the erased cultural identity of the Khasis. However, for other authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, this process of appropriation does not actually work in the African context since the English language in the post-colonial societies is restricted only to the educated elites and thereby is restricted to the comprador class within the society. This becomes a persistent topic of debate among postcolonial writers, which still remains unresolved.

Pariat's astute appropriation and indigenisation of the English language, as observed in her collection *Boats on Land*, plays a pivotal role in infusing her fictions with cultural sensibilities and a distinctive local essence. Notably, one notable technique employed by Pariat is what can be termed "glossing." These glosses skillfully reveal an implicit void between the word and its referent, thereby transforming the glossed word into a profound cultural signifier. At the outset of the first story, "A Waterfall of Horses," Pariat intentionally employs the term *Ka ktien*, an evocative Khasi expression denoting 'spoken words,' thus heralding a nuanced interplay between language, meaning, and culture:

> How do I explain the word?
> *Ka ktien*.
> Say it. Out loud. *Ka ktien*. (3)

The meaning of certain words might not be immediately apparent to English-speaking Western readers. Nevertheless, through their repetitive use by the writer, readers gradually grasp their significance within the context, feeling the sharpness attached to them. For instance, the term “rangbah shnong” in “Echo Words”, is a Khasi expression denoting the village headman (55). Similarly, “kumno” (56) functions as a Khasi greeting meaning “how are you?”, and “khublei” (“19/87” 99 and 106) a Khasi word for ‘thank you’ or ‘God bless’, while “pyrta shnong” (73) refers to the town crier in “Dream of the Golden Mahseer”. Other examples include “dorji” (“19/87” 101), which signifies a tailor in the Khasi language in “19/87”, “thoh teem” (103), denoting a traditional gambling game in “19/87”, “kwai” (“Echo Words” 48, 54; “19/87” 105, 107; “Pilgrimage” 177) a Khasi term for betel nut, which is chewed along with lime and betel leaf (‘tamul’ in Assam and Nagaland, ‘kua’ or ‘kuhva’ in Manipur and Mizoram respectively), and “khynnah dakaid” (“Laitlum” 129, 135), a Khasi phrase meaning ‘bad boy’ in “Laitlum”.

Primarily, the writer intends for readers to comprehend these words on their own, deferring the act of glossing until later. This deliberate strategy not only serves as a language technique but also acknowledges that the connotations and weight assigned to these words within Meghalaya society may differ significantly from their counterparts in European and American societies. Thus, the use of terms such as *ka ktien* and *dkhar* surpasses mere translations like ‘spoken words’ and ‘outsider’ found in Standard English. Instead, they encapsulate a profound cultural and historical background interwoven with social norms and beliefs.

Within the realm of conveying cultural distinctiveness, an additional strategy emerges— that of preserving words in their original, un-translated state. These linguistic gems remain un-glossed, their meaning offered through contextual cues. In the domain of postcolonial texts, this deliberate act of linguistic resistance unveils the presence of an ‘other’ language, defying translation norms. In their linguistic endeavours, some postcolonial writers meld the structures of multiple languages, thereby engendering an ‘inter-culture’ that defies easy categorisation. Furthermore, the fusion of local language syntax with the lexical forms of English reverberates as

a frequent occurrence in the realm of postcolonial writings, effectively negotiating the boundaries of language and culture.

Pariat adopts a deliberate strategy by intentionally leaving the term “Nong Knia” (“A Waterfall” 11) without an initial gloss. However, when she eventually provides an explanation, she goes beyond a mere single-word definition. Instead, she situates it within a specific context, skillfully constructing layers of meaning that envelop the word. Finally, Pariat delves into the intricacies of its construction, introducing a notable gap that separates “Nong Knia” from its association with the concept of the “bearer of the word” (“A Waterfall” 12).

Pariat also employs a notable technique of incorporating untranslated compound words into her writing, as observed in her mention of traditional foods such as “jadoh” (“Echo Words” 48), a combination of ‘ja’ and ‘doh’ signifying ‘rice’ and ‘meat,’ “dohjem,” which combines ‘doh’ and ‘jem’ to represent ‘meat’ and ‘pork intestine,’ “doh sniang” denoting ‘pork,’ and “doh khleh” literally meaning ‘pork meat mainly neck and head’ (“Echo Words” 51), among others. These culinary references hold distinct cultural significance and purposefully remain untranslatable, as the writer finds no suitable English equivalents to capture their essence accurately. In a manner reminiscent of how Continental cuisine preserves the names of French and Italian dishes, Pariat chooses to leave these culturally specific words untranslated. Attempting to replace them with longer explanations consisting of two or three words would be futile, as it would fail to effectively capture the essence of the concept. Moreover, even with such explanations, the true essence of these words would remain elusive, contributing to a sense of vagueness in conveying their meaning.

Pariat’s *Boats on Land* also showcases another technique known as ‘syntactic fusion’. This technique is exemplified through her use of plurals such as *dkhars* in “Echo Words,” “19/87,” “Laitlum,” and “Pilgrimage” and *puris* in “Dream of the Golden Mahseer.” Here, the author incorporates native words while adhering to the syntactic and grammatical rules of the English language. This form of syntactic fusion highlights the notion that words are not confined to embodying a specific

cultural essence. It suggests that new lexical forms can emerge in English by employing the linguistic structures of other languages.

Pariat also employs a unique contextual framework that is considerably detached from the English-speaking world, thereby necessitating the redefinition of certain terms, particularly those pertaining to kinship. This redefinition is prompted by the notable divergence in kinship patterns within Khasi culture compared to Western societies and other English-speaking communities. For instance, the term *Bah* is utilised to denote an elder brother or a respectful salutation towards a male figure older than the speaker. Likewise, the term *Kong* signifies a woman who is either an elder sister, a married woman, or an older female relative sharing a parent with the speaker. *Mama* is employed to designate a maternal uncle. It is essential to recognise that these familial relationships hold distinct connotations within the local milieu of the narratives. The author's deliberate adoption of such kinship terms serves the purpose of distinguishing the Khasi family institution from its Western counterparts. Furthermore, these kinship terms serve as manifestations of the intricate web of family relations and robust familial bonds within the Khasi community. They may also allude to the profound veneration and deference inherent in the indigenous context, in addition to underscoring the notion of an extended and multi-generational family institution prevalent in Khasi society.

Through the extensive and meticulous application of language appropriation in her narratives, Pariat has positioned herself as a postcolonial author, adeptly manifesting indigenous cultural traits through linguistic finesse. This cultural assertion finds its articulation in the incorporation of indigenous languages within the texts. Despite her education in English-medium institutions and fluency in the English language, Pariat deems it indispensable to appropriate English as a means to portray Khasi society and culture. While selecting English as the medium to convey the essence of the people of Meghalaya, with an eye toward an international readership, she defies the limitations of its lexicon, phrases, and syntax by interweaving expressions and syntactic structures derived from indigenous languages, thereby vividly representing the society and culture. Furthermore, Pariat appropriates English in a manner that aligns with the objective of portraying Khasi

life, aiming to enrich the English language through the incorporation of linguistic elements from the indigenous language, thereby imbuing it with a more Khasi sensibility capable of conveying the cultural experiences prevalent within Khasi society.

Oral literature plays an important role in the literature from the northeast region of India. Oral literature may be regarded as a lens through which one can look at a vibrant storytelling tradition of a particular tribe. This old storytelling tradition is sometimes integrated into modern literature that gives a distinct identity to the literature of the northeast region. Kailash C. Baral, talking about literature from northeast India, argues, "The people who call this territory their home define the uniqueness and diversity of their cultures, customs and social practices through their oral and written literatures" (*Earth Songs* x). In her collection *Boats on Land*, Pariat creatively interweaves myths and superstition with political, historical, and social events which are both local and international. The preludes to *Boats on Land* elevate the spoken word or *ka ktien* as having special significance among the people and the precursor of the script. The Khasi culture was primarily oral until the mid-1800s when Christian missionaries transcribed the Khasi language into the Roman script. Since all records have survived through the spoken words, the people's origin, customs, tradition, and milieu are explained and preserved through the precarious power of folk narratives. The words provide a way of understanding and imagining their world; it guards and preserves their memory and knowledge. Thus, the Khasi people give great reverence to the oral tradition, and it holds an integral part of their social interaction. All these things have resulted in the shaping of Pariat's stories.

In the oral culture, all accounts have survived through storytelling, and thus the tradition, custom, origin, natural phenomenon, and history are explained by the oral narratives, and it is through these narratives that we are able to understand their imaginations and understanding of the world. Every community has its myths and tales, which are passed down through the spoken word from generation to generation; thus, myths are regarded to be the product of communities' primitive beliefs and culture. So, by studying myths, we can learn how different societies have

their answers to basic questions about the world and man's place in it. Defining the meaning of myths, Maria Leach postulates:

> Myths tell of the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; they tell why a particular animal has its characteristics (e.g. why the bat is blind or flies only at night), why or how certain natural phenomena came to be (e.g. why the rainbow appears or how the constellation Orion got into the sky), how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue. (778)

Since myths and legends remain an integral part of the lives of the Khasis, every natural phenomenon – birth, illness, death – is explained and understood through it. In the stories, the everyday life is infused with the folkloristic and a deep belief in the supernatural. The stories in *Boats on Land* are the stories of ordinary people: farmer, doctors, soldiers, school girls, tailor, hunters, the ill, the dead, and the lovelorn youngsters. However, Pariat sees their lives through a kaleidoscope and paints their stories with the magical touch of myth and folklore. It is the meeting point between reality and myth. The shape-shifters (men whose souls can inhabit animals) and the mysterious and tragic death at the end in "Sky Graves," the strange dreams of Lucy and their connection to actual incidents in "Kut Madan," the mysterious disappearance of Ezra in "The Discovery of Flight," the transformation of human's spirit into tress in "The Keeper of Souls," the mysterious stories of the fairies in "The Golden Mahseer" and "Embassy" all depict the creativity of Pariat in weaving the everyday with the folkloristic. A sense of mystery and supernatural informs most of these stories; however, in each story, Pariat does not inject her comments but rather leaves her stories unexplained and ends in a mysterious way. Thus, the deep belief in the myth – in expressing and understanding the world – echoes in the characters of Pariat's stories. Moving in and out of facts, reality, and myth, these stories embrace these people, their suffering, and their struggles to deal with the realities of life. Tales and fairies come alive in these stories and thus provide a deeper understanding of the Khasis' culture and traditional beliefs. In an interview with Pranami Tamuli, Pariat explains how the supernatural and magical touch is deeply embedded in the Khasi's tales and how she incorporated this in her stories:

> The communities I grew up in, the Khasis and Jaintias, have this wonderful penchant for the fantastic, 'tall stories' that are borderline unbelievable. In this way, the supernatural touches many tales that don't necessarily involve ghosts. It is a deeply embedded element of our folklore and folk tales, especially because the Khasis and Jaintias hold animist beliefs, of spirits that inhabit forests, rivers, and the wilderness. The stories in *Boats on Land* blend the mundane and the magical, the quixotic and the extraordinary precisely because our 'realities' are multilayered and complex in this manner. There are ghosts within us, perhaps even around us. We live in an ancient world that I like to think is still replete with mystery. ("I'm What's called an Ethnic Mongrel")

Furthermore, these stories may be understood as Pariat's attempt to recover the Khasis' cultural heritage and identity and the retrieval of their pre-modern world and also an attempt to retrieve the rich oral tradition which reflects the economic and social life of the people. In this case, Pariat's narratives may be perceived from the Fanonian sense as an intention of returning to the mythic, mystic, and even cultural traditions through which to establish control over representations of their identity. While the adaptation of myths in fictional works may be unique and distinctive in every author's construction of their story, Pariat's stories in this collection establish a seemingly shared concern over the relationship of people to land, construction of ethnicity, and the narativisation of the 'self' through language. This activity of recuperation and resistance remains a significant characteristic of the late twentieth-century postcolonial narratives. Narrating myth, thus, remains a key practice in the seemingly recovery and retrieval of the colonised imaginary 'self' in the contemporary postcolonial narratives. In the postcolonial literatures, myth is almost always read in region-specific terms. Myth's capacity to narrate forms of resistance and recuperation may lead us to the question of what and whose resistance? What and whose recuperation? What and whose myth? A careful analysis of the select texts will throw light on these questions and interrogate how myth has become one's alternative history.

According to Aparna Halpe, the idea of myth as both true and false "provides postcolonial authors with an ideal foundation on which to construct narratives that interrogate the ideological impact of particular historical moment" (10). He also argues that by drawing on one's ancient myth, the author has an opportunity to invoke a "prefabricated frame of meaning" that the readers can recognise:

> However, by making "myth" the point of entry into a historical moment, the author also suggests a particular reading of history that is, to a large extent, determined by the reader's emotional response to the "truth" of the myth. This emotional response always holds the key to the ideological core of the myth, and by extension, it also demonstrates the author's own manipulation of ideology in response to history. (10)

Thus, narrating one's history and cultural experiences by employing myth proposes myth as an alternative history. Nevertheless, the manner the author invokes the ideological impulses of the myth in narrating his or her history remains one important issue. For instance, when Pariat constructs the story of the protagonists' fate as revolving around the myth of water fairies/ spirits in the form of the "golden masheer" in "Dream of the Golden Masheer," the myth of old mantras in "Echo Words" and the myth of the mischievous spirit *suidtynjang* in "The Discovery of Flight," she communicates the primordial mythic narratives of man's fate as opposed to the modern scientific explanations of fate. This aspect of the mytheme carries powerful ideological significance when Pariat links this to the degradation of the native worldview against the powerful narratives of the modern worldview.

Postcolonial criticism of myth focuses mainly on the archival approach that identifies myths and legends of the indigenous tribe in their texts and again scrutinises their relevance in the theme of the texts. In postcolonial literatures, myths are very often employed to narrate difficult histories and socio-cultural experiences so as to provide alternative histories. In postcolonial fictions, the process of narrating indigenous myths, folktales, and legends as racial narratives leads to the critical reception of reading myths in region-specific terms. For the author, myths, and legends become a medium through which to redress the erasure of indigenous

narrative tradition and to reconstruct this tradition in relation to notions of cultural identity. In this regard, Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) provides a perfect example. Here, Soyinka creatively relocates and adopts indigenous notions of myth to the assignment of the writing community in post-independence Nigeria. His rhetoric itself is an exercise in employing mythic narratives that forefront the ritualistic language. His criticism of myths may be regarded as a reflection of his deep concern about the relationship between myth and narration of an African imaginary. He expresses how instrumental myths are in the process of cultural recuperation of the African past.

Pariat's story, "A Waterfall of Horses," may also be read as the narration of the Khasis' history of their early contacts with the British colonisers. The old chants of the *Nong Knia* may be perceived as a metaphorical narration of the native's resistance against the imperialist culture. The chants fighting against the guns and the spoken words against the alphabet strikingly signify the author's tendency to redress the erased indigenous narrative tradition. Here, Pariat employs myth to depict the cultural resistance taken up by the natives against the colonisers'. The closing lines of the story are also highly significant, where we see that the waterfall is the only thing that remains in Pomreng village – "The one thing that remains is the waterfall, throwing up a sound, a word that is ungraspable and constant" (Pariat, "A Waterfall" 19). Like Pomreng, things in the life of the Khasis gradually fall apart with the coming of Western modernity, and even if 'words', which here signifies the cultural tradition of the Khasis, still keep throwing up in the wind, they remain ungraspable and understandable. In the story "Dream of the Golden Mahseer," we also see the narrator lamenting and contemplating people's disappearances in which he finally announces: "I realize that no one is truly ever gone. All voices are heard in a river's murmuring" (78). Here the narrator indicates the disappearance of his uncle, Mama Kyn, whose reason and manner of disappearance are unknown. The "voices" being heard in the "river's murmuring" here may be perceived as a metaphorical narration of the folks' history and belief system being trapped and preserved in the people's minds.

These narratives may be read as resistance to the modern worldview and its dominant discourse of labelling the indigenous' narratives as both primitive and irrational. Pariat's narratives, in this case, have a significant affinity to Fanon's tendency of re-constructing a new history and representation of the African Blacks. Postmodernists, too, brought a new understanding of knowledge and science; that attempts to view reality in a new way. They reject the possibility of constructing a single and correct worldview and any kind of definitive description. Rejecting the fundamental assumption of modernist thinkers, they look into the world from a different perspective and reject the notion of an objective world but rather view the world as a construction of our minds.

As Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) called it, the oral narratives and the people's belief in their myths may be termed as 'little narratives' or 'mini narratives'. Lyotard, by provoking scepticism about universalising theories, which he terms 'grand narratives' and other sources of authoritarianism, argues that "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust" (qtd. in Williams 211). He also argues that little narratives have become an appropriate way to explain and define social problems, social transformation, and the history of the people.

In the field of postcolonial studies, the adaptation of myth and folklore in fictional narratives is closely related to the process of imagining and writing back to the centre. The employment of myths, legends, and oral narrative techniques raises questions about authority and representation against the indigenous identity. This process of employing traditional beliefs in postcolonial fictional narratives that once remained a significant agent in identity formation and psychological bonding may be perceived as resistance against authority. Pariat, for instance, gives high reverence to oral narration in her stories and incessantly employs folkloric and mythic elements in shaping her stories. The exchange of words between townsfolk in the story "Echo Words" is suggestive of the kind of anthropological studies on the native tribe undertaken mainly during the early last century:

I heard … that the memsahib is here to write a book on the Khasis.'

> ‘Why? . . . . Are we some strange exotic animal species? . . . . Now, why and for what she’s doing this, I don’t know. The Shahibs have strange ideas. . . but no good will come of this, I can feel it in my bones.’ (Pariat 49)

However, for Pariat, it is the oral culture, ‘the spoken word,’ that best narrates the cultural history of the Khasis with accuracy:

> 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. (“A Waterfall of Horses” 3)

As expressed in the form of myth and folklore, the folk narratives open up a way for the folks’ representation of their cultural history and identity to become an important aspect in countering the larger narratives against their identity. This notion of writing back to the centre and questioning representation and authority becomes an important aspect of postcolonial studies. Moreover, as Homi K. Bhabha himself has proposed of reading the world literature in terms of the historical trauma people have suffered, a focus on the unspoken and unrepresented pasts haunting the historical past remain a significant aspect in postcolonial studies today (12).

For Pariat, the oral tradition remains a significant bearer of their history and identity, and she suggests that it is through the understanding of this tradition that one finds his/her location in the text:

> How do I explain the word? . . . For I mean not what’s bound by paper. Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and popography 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. (“A Waterfall” 3)

According to Kanneh, the notion of postcolonial reveals in itself the devotion to both historical analysis and questioning of History’s status as the one story of Western progress and power. Colonialism, supposedly an outcome of post-enlightenment

rationality, reason, science and knowledge, leads to the postcolonial crisis of identity around the politics of time and place (140). Kanneh further argues that history, which has been supposedly regarded as the nineteenth-century philosophical and political excuse for colonial economic agenda, has now come under scrutiny from various discourses, including ethnography and poststructuralism:

> The emphasis on Hegel's philosophy of History in this context, as a eurocentric assertion of Western identity versus a Historyless Other can be criticized as an over-simplistic reading of causes and effects—comparable to blaming evolutionist anthropologies and racism directly on Darwin's Origin of Species. However, following Robert Young's insistence that 'the problem involves rather the ways in which Hegel has been read, absorbed and adapted', my concern here is with readings and misreadings of what, to use Fabian's phrase, can be called a 'Politics of Time'. (140)

Pariat's narratives foreground the myths and traditional customs through the lore that are present in the collective memory of the people. This incessant appearance of the oral and folk elements in her stories can be perceived as an attempt to re-enliven the tribal theosophy that once informed the traditional ways of life of the Khasis. Elaborating on oral tradition as the repository of culture, Bhalchandra Nemade rightly observes that "The native spirit is gloriously reflected in the oral literatures of the world along with their provincial manners, geographical details and dialectical features of language and they have a high universal appeal for those very reasons." (200)

The oral narratives are the signs of cultural identity, and the significance of oral tradition comes from the urge to identify oneself or one's community as belonging to a particular set of belief systems against any other misrepresentations. Such traces of cultural symbols and identity, in the opinion of D. Venkat Rao, may be retrieved through the rich and vibrant oral narratives:

> The valleys and hills [of north east] that surround us bear testimonies to a violent subjection to a mode of being that required a more radical violent

> erasure of other rhythms and modes of being. Elimination of a morung, discrediting a performative tradition concerning say, stone-pulling, head-hunting or mithun sacrifice, wipes out millennial memories of putting the body to work and rendering mnemopraxial responsibility to what one receives and lives with. (52)

In her stories, Pariat communicates the complex middle-ground world between myth and reality, the world of myth, legends, magic, traditional beliefs, the world of scientific advancement and logical explanations, and the transitionary phase between traditional and modern ways of life. The narratives stand between these two opposing worlds.

Even after the Khasis witnessed a change with the arrival of the outsiders: the Christian missionaries, the *dkhars*, schools, and successive governments in the post-independence era, most people still believe in the myth, magic, and the supernatural that they have inherited through the spoken words since time immemorial. Despite improvements in transportation facilities, the introduction of scientific knowledge in schools and colleges, and improvements in the standard of living, the Khasi people are firmly rooted in their traditional beliefs and rituals. The people's love for their land and the bond that they have shared with their natural surroundings can also be seen in many of their stories and poems. The centrality of land and nature in the life of the Khasi people may be well-understood from the words of Shangpliang:

> The Khasis are one of the tribal communities of the Northeast who have maintained a very close symbiotic relationship with the environment since time immemorial, and whose ethnocultural traits have been greatly influenced by the natural surroundings. . . . The Khasis have a very close affinity to nature therefore forest which is an important component of nature is intricately linked to the life of the Khasis.
>
> For a Khasi the forest is a well-loved home, a game sanctuary and also an abode of worship, all rolled in one, around which his social, cultural and religious activities revolve. (xiii)

Pariat's collection *Boats on Land,* which is a collection of fifteen short stories, may be read as a chronology of more than a century's stretch of the Khasis' experience and cultural history. Opening the collection with the story "A Waterfall of Horses," which was set in the 1850s during the early contact of the natives with the British colonisers and missionaries, the second half of the collection contains stories that depict the city of Shillong from its volatile post-statehood era and the people's struggles for their identity and political rights, while the collection ends with the story "An Ariel View" which was set in a more recent time. While the sense of the supernatural informs most of her stories, they are, however, anchored in the real – in the mundane life of ordinary men and women, their struggles and experiences.

The epigraph to *Boats on Land* – "I found the marvelous real with every step" (Pariat vii) – is taken from the preface to *The Kingdom of this World* (1949) by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. This 'marvelous real' may be understood as 'presupposing a faith'. Such a faith or marvellous real for the Khasis is endured from a tradition immersed in myth and folklore. Accounts of origin and stories of existence thus existed out of various originary myths ranging from the emergence of the seven clans descending to earth from heaven to the creation of five children – the Sun, the Moon, the Water, the Wind, and the Fire, etc. (Nongkynrih 2-4). These beliefs have thus provided the Khasis with a sense of history and identity since they constitute an essential part of the folk discourses around which they have organised and understood their world. Talking about how the storytelling tradition began for the Khasis and its significance in shaping the people's worldview, Nongkynrih writes:

> The stories began with an exposition showing how the world was created and how Man had come down from heaven to inhabit the earth and populate its wilderness. From here they progressed to the Khasi worldview, their concept of God and religion, their concept of good and evil, their matrilineal social structure, their clan system, their democratic governance – and so forth. These constitute the creation myths, or what the Khasis call *khanatang,* or sanctified stories.

> The function of such stories is to elucidate the Khasi philosophical thought on every aspect of Khasi culture and make sure that it reaches and holds captive even the simplest of men. (viii-ix)

In the lives of the Khasis, the supernatural and the uncanny thus co-existed with the real. This understanding of the world inspired the reality of this collection. Here, the spoken words have enormous power. As the narrator in "A Waterfall of Horses" reiterates that – "everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, ki ktien. It has the power to do good" (Pariat 12) – the spoken word carries the power to relate the present with the past and the present experiences with that of the historical moment in the past. This story depicts how a horrific and supernatural ending of the story has its genesis in the chants of an old man, Nong Knia, 'the bearer of words', who is believed to have used the power of words to destroy their enemies: "We won't strike the men. . . There are other ways to render them powerless" (Pariat 12). In this story, vengeance has been achieved not by the strength of muscles but by incantation. This story, set in the 1850s colonial era in a small village in Meghalaya, portrays the early contact of the native Khasis with the British colonisers and missionaries. In the story, a series of mysterious and tragic events occur, including the inexplicable madness and death of the horses belonging to the White men, which resulted in the animals leaping off a cliff into a waterfall, as well as the mysterious death of several soldiers and the gradual disintegration of their camp. Despite attempts to provide rational explanations for these events, they remain unexplained. However, the indigenous people attribute these occurrences to the curse of the 'bearer of words,' the Nong Knia, which they believe was invoked through the use of mantras:

> 'We have one weapon, poor as it may seem, the power of ktien – the word. . . We won't strike the men'. . . . 'They killed Jymmang. We need to kill them.' The old man [the Nong Knia] shook his head. 'There are other ways to render them powerless.' ("A Waterfall of Horses" 12)

In the aftermath of the tragic events, the indigenous inhabitants of Pomreng village began to abandon their village, and the barracks and stables of the soldiers

subsequently fell into disrepair and disintegrated. The village ultimately remained uninhabited. However, the one constant in this narrative is the waterfall, which continues to emit a sound, described as a word that is ungraspable and constant (19). This tragic story of the Pomreng natives and the White men is preserved through the sound of the waterfall, which symbolises the unchanging nature of spoken words, acting as a preserver and guardian of the natives' past.

Belief in the mantras, magic, and fairies is deeply embedded in the life of the Khasi people; however, the advent of Western Christianity and the process of modernisation have led to a suppression of these voices. Nevertheless, these voices persist and re-emerge whenever unexplainable or supernatural phenomena confront the community. This can be observed in the native's reaction to the disappearance of the French lady anthropologist and her translator, Malcolm, in the story "Echo Words." In the story, the Rynjah family, known for their purported knowledge of mantras or magic capable of causing significant harm, is suspected of being responsible for the disappearance of the French lady anthropologist and her translator, Malcolm. It is rumoured that the two individuals eloped together, leaving Malcolm's wife distressed. In retaliation, it is believed that Malcolm's wife, a member of the ancient Rynjah family, employed old mantras. The precise reasons for their disappearance remain unclear, and all that can be inferred are echoes of words that are vague and ungraspable:

> The winds here were trapped by the mountains; our words weren't blown away. Instead, they returned to us in strange, distorted echoes, ferocious reflections of ourselves. ("Echo Words" 59)

'Echo Words' here signify the words or voices of pre-Christian belief systems that persisted in certain isolated regions, despite attempts at suppression by dominant alien discourse. These voices and words are metaphorically represented as being trapped within the mountainous terrain, preserving remnants of a bygone era. The imagery of "war cemetery, livestock, ammunition and jeeps that the American and British army buried" (59) serves as a symbol for the suppression of traditional belief systems and the cultural artefacts associated with them, brought about through

Western intervention. This suppression resulted in the erosion of their reality: the world of mantras, magic, and fairies, the world which they once believed existed. However, these unearthed themselves when faced with some unexplainable and supernatural phenomenon. In this regard, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih rightly postulates that ". . . the Khasis invented a story for everything . . . to explain the inexplicable, to comprehend the incomprehensible, they always find a story" (*Around the Hearth* x).

The meeting of two different cultures and traditions and the clash of two distinct sets of beliefs and values have been depicted in the story "A Waterfall of Horses." Pariat opens the story by reminding her readers how much reverence and significance the Khasis have paid to 'words'. Words, for the Khasis, are a guiding force, a system, and an instrument with which the people lighten their grievances and utter their bliss and sorrows. It has to be revered since it torches all the darkest corners of their minds that need to be enlightened when they are confronted with something extraordinarily rare and untraceable.

The significance of dreams and nightmares in the life of the Khasi people is vividly portrayed in the story "At Kut Madan." In the narrative, the protagonist, Lucy, a nineteen-year-old white orphaned female, is depicted as experiencing a significant decline in health, marked by an array of strange dreams and exhaustion, which leads to weight loss. Despite her physical symptoms, there is no indication of any underlying psychological pathology. She describes her dream imagery as featuring golden eggs falling like rain and of being inside a fiery bird, which is dismissed by her aunt as fanciful and unrealistic. The only character in the story who is willing to entertain the veracity of her experiences is Kyntang, a local boy:

> 'She [her aunt] says it's silly to pay attention to dreams.' Lucy turned, her eyes, bright and wary, met his. 'But you, doctor, you don't think so. Kynthang told me that here dreams are as important as waking life.' (32)

Her aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Smithson, harbour the belief that her symptoms are indicative of possession by malevolent entities, and as a result, they opt to summon

Father Bevan to perform an exorcism. Ultimately, she recovers and returns to her home country of England, where her experiences are largely forgotten. However, at the conclusion of the story, it is suggested that her previously disregarded dream imagery may have been rooted in some form of veridical reality:

> They were all standing at the edge of the forest, pointing and looking over the cliff. Doctor Wallang made his way to the front of the crowd and found himself next to Flynn.
>
> 'What is it?' he asked. . . 'A Dakota,' replied Flynn, 'carrying passengers. . . bless their souls.'
>
> The aircraft could barely be seen – it had crashed and tumbled further down to a ledge – though metallic fragments were scattered across the rocks like shiny rain. (41-42)

Are folktales and fairy tales a manifestation of the alternate functioning of the human psyche? Are dreams and folklore alternative explanations of the human mind and psychological condition that are hard to accept in reality? Pariat's stories have embraced these people, their traumatic experiences, their struggles, and their pain in dealing with the realities of life. These stories offer a deeper understanding of the people's culture and mental landscape.

Narratives in the form of literature have been effectively adopted by postcolonial indigenous writers to represent and redefine notions of their cultural identity. The relocation and recuperation of indigenous cultural identity that comes under threat with the advent of globalisation and modernisation become the main focal point of Pariat in her writings. The elements of folkloristic, mythic, and cultural beliefs, thus, remain pivotal in constructing a knowledge that will further work as challenging all kinds of stereotypes and misrepresentations. Postmodernists like Lyotard sought for dismantling the totalitarian and authoritarian narratives in order to capture narratives of the marginal, the liminal, and the fragmented. Getting in line with Foucault's power/knowledge, Lyotard argues that knowledge, today, becomes merely a commodity whose acquisition indicates the acquisition of power. The status

of knowledge is also ever-changing because of the ever-changing nature of its acquisition, storage, and dissemination. He further argues that the sense of self and identity is based mainly on the knowledge generated and codified by either others or by itself:

> The human child is already positioned as the referent of a story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will evidently chart his course. (15)

He further proposes that since this body of knowledge is, after all, an organisation of narratives, everyone is located in narratives because narratives are the "quintessential form of customary knowledge" (19). According to him, human sciences, including science, history, psychology, social theory, etc., are also presented in particular kinds of narratives, and these narratives are never neutral bodies of knowledge. The postmodernists, thus, "by rejecting totalizing narratives . . . resist any homogenized explanations or theorization. . . [and argues that] notions of 'truth' within such narrative . . . are exercises in power and seek to homogenize differences in order to create a sense of harmonious truth" (Nayar 52). Foucault's argument about discourse helps us "show how discourse has material consequences for people, and that discourses construct and legitimize unequal power relation" (qtd. in Nayar 36). He also argues that "Every discourse has an object, a language, an authority-figure who uses this language to describe/classify the object and a corrective mechanism that draws upon the description and classification" (36). Postmodernists, thus, clinging to the poststructuralists' notion of 'differance' (as used by Derrida), textuality, and inter-textuality, by suggesting multiplicities, openness, and anti-totality they propose freedom and fragmentation of narratives. The experiences, history, and beliefs of the Khasis, as reflected in the stories of Pariat, which are presented in fragments and non-linear sequences, have been elevated to the status of knowledge that becomes a significant discourse of their identity and culture. The turn to oral traditions, myths, and storytelling formats by the author is thus, perceived as the author's search for identity. The discourse that narrates the experience and realities in the life of the Khasis, their perception of 'truth', and their understanding of the world, which

remain subdued and marginalised by the totalitarian discourse, has been revived and reconstructed by the author.

Culture has been conceptualised as the story that its members tell in order to comprehend the various elements of social life (Hinchman and Hinchman 235). Consequently, narratives play a crucial role in constructing the community (Keeshing-Tobias 120). The set of symbols, characters, and plots presented by a particular community's stories furnish its members with the means to comprehend, navigate, and even shape their world (Bruner 66) in the context of the blurring internal colonisers. The culture is expressed through the repetition of canonical forms by members of the community within their daily lives (Gergen and Gergen 40). Storytelling holds significant importance, as it not only offers a multiplicity of perspectives but also serves as a narrative challenge to the reality imposed by the mainstream. The selective, rearranged, reinterpreted, and simplified nature of storytelling provides the present audience with an interpretive lens and an understanding of the alternative worldviews of tribal societies. Despite their partially formed nature, the tales hold glimpses of time that can be revisited through retelling. The act of narrating these stories presents the self as a work in progress, capable of revision in response to the demands of the current situation (Chakraborty 29). According to Gergen and Gergen, "One's view of self in a given moment is fundamentally non-sensical unless it can be linked in some fashion with his or her past" (255).

To generalise, literatures from northeast India may be perceived as characterised by a sense of "rootedness" and the author's "conscious attempt to adopt elements from their own oral tradition" as they attempt to create a field of literature that would "resist the colonial project of a denial of history or literature to the colonized" (Misra xvii). Myths and folklore, for the writers from northeast India, become instrumental in their attempt of creating a distinct voice countering colonial discourses through the medium of fictional narratives. In this regard, the Arunachali writer, Mamang Dai argues that myths and legends are means of identification

through which the people “recognize each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community” (5).

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# CHAPTER FOUR

# SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY: QUEERING PARIAT'S FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

The discipline of psychology has long been embroiled in the complex interplay between cultural and political perspectives on same-sex desire, identity, and behaviour. From early legal, medical, and scientific discussions of homosexuality to contemporary policy debates across the globe, discussions of same-sex desire have been at the forefront of societal discourse (Hammack et al. 219). However, this contemporary discourse on public policy regarding same-sex desire, behaviour, and identity is not a recent phenomenon but rather the latest iteration of a longstanding history of the social regulation of desire. This history can be traced back to the nineteenth century, a period marked by significant social, political, and economic changes brought about by urbanisation and industrialisation. Throughout this historical process, various scientific disciplines, including psychology, have played a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes towards same-sex desire. Through their research and theories, these disciplines have both reinforced and challenged cultural and political norms surrounding same-sex desire and identity (Hammack et al. 219), contributing to the ongoing evolution of societal perspectives on sexuality.

In late nineteenth-century Europe, the medical model of homosexuality emerged as a profound influence on the initial generation of empirical work in psychology, advancing a narrative of sickness and pathology concerning same-sex attraction. This notion effectively solidified a metanarrative of illness/sickness, presenting formidable psychological challenges for individuals with same-sex attraction, as exemplified in the autobiographical accounts of Martin Duberman in his 1991 book *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey*. Psychoanalytic case reports dominated early literature on homosexuality in Europe and America and relied upon a sickness narrative for interpretation. Their tenuous claim of an association between homosexuality and mental illness was circular, given that their subjects were primarily the mentally ill (Hammack 221). Consequently, early psychological research successfully linked homosexuality with hallucinations, alcoholism, schizophrenia, delusions, and so forth[1]. Rather than being the primary subject of inquiry in these early works, a script of sickness with respect to homosexuality was merely assumed and utilised for case interpretation. In the context of America, Henry L. Minton has observed that a handful of scholars from the nineteenth century

onwards aspired to “use science to liberate gays from medical treatment, moral ostracism, and legal punishment” (3). This sickness script among psychologists in the 1930s was likely entrenched in rigid conceptions of gender and gender roles, revealing the interstices of power and knowledge that structure the cultural politics of same-sex desire.

Thus, the corpus of psychological scholarship in Europe and America during the majority of the twentieth century was characterised by a prevailing sickness narrative of homosexuality, which served to buttress the underlying justification for the legal and cultural subjugation of those with same-sex attraction. However, a new authoritative discourse called ‘species narrative’ emerged within the field that challenged the fundamental premise of this sickness narrative. This means that in the initial phase of psychological inquiry on same-sex desire, criminalisation and cultural ostracisation of these desires are legitimised. The latter half of the 1960s witnessed the emergence of an incisive challenge to the prevailing sickness narrative, driven by the stirring social and political activism of the gay and lesbian community. As D’Emilio notes, the emergent gay activist in the late 1960s “solidly ground[ed] themselves in righteous anger over perceived injustice” (174). The sickness narrative, which previously positioned same-sex attraction as a character defect or a manifestation of psychopathology, underwent a discursive shift towards the notion of “minority identity”. This shift was in keeping with the objectives of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, which advocated for parity in rights and protections on the basis of a minority identity.

During this period of research on homosexuality in psychology, there occurred a gradual shift from the dominant sickness narrative towards a more inclusive ‘species narrative’. This narrative identified homosexuality as a normative manifestation of human diversity, reflecting the full spectrum of sexual desire. Within this empirical epoch, the clinical concept of the “homosexual type” began to erode, making way for the emergence of the “sexual minority” as a social identity (Hammack et al. 224). A space was opened up for psychological science to assume a more socially transformative role, challenging the established legal and political order.

As a result of the political and social activism undertaken by the same-sex-attracted community, who had endeavoured to retrieve the notion of homosexuality through the homophile movement – a movement in the 1950s and 60s supporting and representing sexual minorities – a number of social scientists became receptive to the conception of the same-sex-attracted persons as a social, rather than clinical, construct (D'Emilio 173-5).

As political concerns surrounding same-sex attraction increasingly drew upon the species narrative, as exemplified by the gay marriage movement, a new dominant narrative developed to contest the already established narratives. This new narrative, which has been termed the 'subject narrative', invokes Michel Foucault's dual meanings of subjectivity:

> There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 781)

The paradigmatic shift towards power, discourse, and identity concerns in scholarship signalled a transformative moment, precipitating the emergence of the 'queer theory' movement in the 1990s. Queer theory unsettles conventional epistemologies of sexual and gender identity by subverting the binary relationships and categories that support them, as exemplified by the works of Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis. It lacks a determinate definition or set of essential attributes. As Halperin notes, "There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. . . . It is an identity without an essence" (62). In its refusal to assume a fixed form, queer asserts a stance of resistance against any conception of the normal. Similar to the early gay liberation movement, queer challenges the normative models and conventional categories of sexuality. It is neither assimilationist nor separatist and proceeds from the premise that sexuality is a discursively constructed phenomenon (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 11, 38, 62, 68). Queer seeks to unearth the differences and silences that are subordinated by the homo-heterosexual binary and the singular classifications of 'lesbian' and 'gay,' unravelling the complex ways in

which lesbian and gay sexualities are shaped by factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity (Sedgwick 7-8). According to Alderson and Anderson, the concept of "queer" emerges as a disruptive force, poised to subvert the very bedrock of "normative judgments" (2). Its potency lies in its potential to mobilise diverse "social antagonisms," encompassing dimensions of gender, race, nationality, class, and religion (Eng et al. 1). As a critical tool, "queer" disrupts the hegemonic logic of classificatory systems, subjecting their rigid demarcations to relentless interrogation and unsettling their facile designations (Hall, *Queer Theories* 14). Importantly, Eve Sedgwick draws our attention to the etymology of "queer," rooted in the Indo-European "twerkw," suggesting a movement "across" rather than a mere opposition (xii). Thus, it conveys not only a resistant stance but also an interstitial space of intersection and interchange. These connotations resonate with the dialogic nature of reconciling opposing parties. Unlike more specific categories like 'gay' or 'homosexual,' which primarily denote dissident sexual orientations, 'queer' signifies not only non-normative sexual identities but also non-dominant discursive positionings (Tse 10). This conceptual elasticity will serve as a guiding lens to scrutinise the depiction and portrayal of queer intimacies within the narratives crafted by Janice Pariat.

During the mid-twentieth century, an array of potent social movements emerged across the globe, including the civil rights movement in the United States of America, the feminist movement agitating for gender equality, the parallel sexual movement that subverted established notions of sexuality and the family, the environment movement transforming perspectives on humanity's relationship with nature, and movements that championed the rights of disabled individuals, immigrants, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer plus (LGBTQ+) communities, and other marginalised groups. These movements had the effect of supplanting the univocal concept of identity with multifarious and fragmented identities, resulting in the eschewal of a singular understanding of selfhood. Consequently, the plural nature of identity has become more visible in social and academic space, affording unprecedented insights into the complex nature of personal identity. According to Mark Casey, during the late 1960s and 1970s, a primary objective of lesbian and gay

liberation activists in the U.S. “was to question and deconstruct assumptions around sexuality and gender” (277). He further argues that these activists have vehemently questioned the authority of scientific and medical establishments in defining “dominant constructions of homosexuality and its worth, value and meaning” (277). Heretofore unquestioned identity labels, rooted in essentialist paradigms, have been contested largely by a new generation of politically engaged and impassioned sexual minorities. In reference to the era’s notable impact in introducing alternative viewpoints on sexual identity, Richardson contends:

> The 1960s and 1970s were undoubtedly one of the most important periods in the history of sexual politics this century. This was a time which saw the revival of feminism and the emergence of lesbian and gay liberation movements; at the same time, morality campaigners redoubled their efforts to resist social changes associated with ‘sexual liberalism’. (35)

The gay liberation movement transcended the singular interests of lesbians and gay men and instead sought to challenge the pervasive dominance of white masculinity within the framework of contemporary capitalism. By proclaiming “that all individuals were sexually androgynous,” Casey argues that the “gay liberation attempted to obliterate the boundaries of the patriarchal gender dynamic that insist on masculine/feminine and homo/hetero division” (278).

In the twentieth century, the notion of identity underwent a significant shift as postmodernism and poststructuralism emerged in the humanities. The 1960s witnessed the proliferation of theories and discourses surrounding identity, with the likes of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others redefining the concept. In the postmodern era, Stuart Hall observes that “the subject previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed not of a single, but of several sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities. . . . This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity” (276-77). The tensions and conflicts that the concept of identity encompasses are what make it vital and unavoidable. Feminism, Marxism, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, gay and lesbian studies, and

postcolonial theory are among the theories that have identified structurally comparable problems with identity. Psychoanalytic theory illustrates this by positing the role of a 'mirror stage' in which the subject gains identity by misrecognising himself/herself in an image. Similarly, Louis Althusser's poststructuralist notion of interpellation postulates that one is 'culturally interpellated' or hailed as a subject and constituted as such by being hailed as the occupant of a given position. Postcolonial subjectivity, in turn, highlights the construction of a divided self through the clashes of opposing discourses and demands. Judith Butler's work reveals heterosexual identity as being predicated on the suppression of the potential for homoerotic desire. The desire to destabilise, deconstruct, and decenter the dominating and totalising narratives that construct the subjectivity of individuals constitutes a common mechanism shared by these contemporary theories. According to Kath Woodward, "postmodernism allows the 'others' to speak, by challenging the certainty of grand narratives. . . [and] has presented troubling alternatives," and the "Poststructuralist thinking has demonstrated the limitations of dualisms and sought to indicate the complex interrelationship between some traditional binaries" (164).

Various theories share certain similarities in their efforts to challenge the dominating discourses that individuals internalise in their definition and comprehension of the self. Psychoanalytic theory conceptualises the subject as a product of complex, intersecting dynamics encompassing the psychological, sexual, and linguistic dimensions rather than a unitary essence. Jacques Lacan's exposition of the "mirror stage" elucidates that the process of identification commences when a child first perceives their reflection in the mirror and associates it with a sense of wholeness and an ideal self-image (Lacan 1). According to Lacan, the self is made up of what is reflected back, including by a mirror, the mother, and other people in general social interactions. Identity is the result of a sequence of incomplete identifications.

In gender studies, the prevailing narratives regarding the construction of feminine identity have been subject to interrogation and critique. Feminist theory suggests that the subject's identity is formed through the imposition of socially constructed gender roles. Furthermore, queer theory contends that the "possibility of

homosexuality" is repressed in order to establish a normative "heterosexual subject" (Culler, *Literary Theory* 109). Judith Butler's influential works have significantly impacted the conceptualisation of the body and the gender/sex discourse. For Butler, Sex is just as culturally constructed as gender: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender" (10). Consequently, the body lacks a predetermined 'sex', and gender identity is only produced through repeated performances of gender.

Postmodernist thought has displayed scepticism towards universalising concepts and authority, such as those conveyed in the 'great narratives' identified by Lyotard. Postmodern theorists have rejected the possibility of justifying the narratives that bring together disciplines and social practices, such as science and culture. Williams suggests that "the narratives we tell to justify a single set of laws and stakes are inherently unjust" (211). In place of such narratives, contemporary theories have highlighted the fluidity of identity and have unearthed the underlying structures and binaries upon which identity constructions are predicated. Modernist or liberal-humanist views of identity affirm the presence of a unique, fixed, and coherent core essence that forms the basis of an individual's character and personality. However, the poststructuralist theory argues that individuals are constantly subjected to cultural and discursive practices, which they cannot be extricated from.

Postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives challenge the traditional views that identity is stable, natural, and inherent. These perspectives argue that identity is constantly in flux, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and historical factors rather than by an innate and unified self. Moreover, they critique the idea of essential differences between groups, such as gender, race, and sexuality, which are constructed and maintained through cultural practices and norms. They reject the notion of objective reality and absolute truth, viewing all knowledge as subjective. For example, Judith Butler, in her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), argues that gender identity is not a fixed or innate quality but rather a performative repetition of actions that are constructed and reinforced through societal norms and expectations. Butler writes, "Gender ought not

to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (179). This highlights the notion that, like other identities, gender identity is not an innate and fixed trait but rather a constructed and reinforced aspect of our social interactions and behaviours.

Within this theoretical framework of postmodern and poststructuralist subjectivity, with its emphasis on the fluidity of identity, the representation of queer and same-sex desire in Pariat's select texts will be examined and critically scrutinised. Such a close examination necessitates an engagement with the subject script/narrative in psychology that has been influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist movements. Pariat's portrayal of queer and same-sex desire can be viewed as a site of contestation, where the boundaries of identity are constantly renegotiated. These representations disrupt the fixed categories of sexual and gender identities, revealing their inherent instability and fluidity. By foregrounding the complexity of these identities, Pariat's texts challenge the dominant discourses that seek to regulate and control them. The destabilising effect of Pariat's representations of queer and same-sex desire can be seen as a form of subversive resistance, a rejection of the normative scripts that shape our understanding of sexuality and gender. This resistance creates the possibility for new and alternative forms of subjectivity to emerge, forms that are not bound by the rigid categories of identity.

In this sense, Pariat's texts can be regarded as performative, actively constructing and shaping our conception of identity and desire. By emphasising the fluidity and instability of these concepts, Pariat's representations call upon us to reassess our assumptions regarding what it means to be queer or have same-sex desire. They invite us to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of these identities and to acknowledge the power dynamics that influence their representation.

In this particular chapter, two novels by Janice Pariat, *Seahorse* (2014) and *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017), along with two short stories, "Boats on Land" and "Secret Corridors" from her collection *Boats on Land* (2012), shall be scrutinised through a critical lens that seeks to unravel the complex interplay between sexuality

and identity. In these selected fictions, the themes of homosexuality and queerness are strikingly pronounced and lend themselves to a nuanced exploration of the ways in which individuals navigate their identities within the broader sociocultural context. Through a close reading of these literary texts, we can discern the subtle nuances that inform and shape our understanding of the complexities of human desire and the various modes through which it is expressed and experienced. Indeed, it is through literary imagination that we can excavate the latent tensions and paradoxes that exist at the intersection of identity, desire and the social forces that shape them.

Within the literary works of Pariat, the novel *Seahorse* is a captivating exploration of the complex interplay between desire and power that animates the relationship between the protagonist Nehemiah and the art historian, Nicholas. Through a subtle interweaving of myth and modernity, Pariat deftly reimagines the Greek myth of Poseidon and his youthful male devotee, Pelops, in a contemporary context that invites a critical examination of the fraught nexus between eroticism and domination. Likewise, the short stories “Secret Corridors” and “Boats on Land” confront the theme of lesbianism and the ways in which the emotional and identitarian dimensions of these lesbian subjects are systematically oppressed and subjugated by the broader social order. The texts adeptly illustrate the pernicious effects of discriminatory and hegemonic discourses that have historically relegated LGBTQ+ individuals to the margins of society.

Through her novel *Seahorse* and selected stories from *Boats on Land*, Pariat offers a nuanced and empathetic exploration of the myriad ways in which identity is experienced and constructed in contemporary society. Her vision of identity stands in sharp contrast to the traditional understanding of identity as something fixed and static essence. Indeed, the very notion of identity has been destabilised and fragmented by the intellectual currents of postmodernism, which have called into question the very idea of a unified, essentialised self. Instead, Pariat’s literary works embrace the notion of multiplicity and pluralism as key features of identity, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of contemporary society. Through her explorations of the complexities of postmodern sexual identity, Pariat offers a powerful critique of the various forms of stigma and marginalisation that have

historically been associated with non-normative modes of desire. By challenging the dominant cultural narratives that have sought to pathologise and exclude LGBTQ+ individuals, her works open up new possibilities for understanding and celebrating the diverse range of identities that constitute the fabric of our social world.

Pariat's stories in *Boats on Land* are predominantly anchored in the geographical terrain of Shillong, Cherrapunji, and Assam. However, the settings of her other fictions traverse multiple spaces and geographies, spanning from Delhi to London in *Seahorse* and from unnamed Indian cities to London in *The Nine-Chambered Heart*. The latter novel operates as a compendium of shifting perspectives, as nine characters recollect their relationship with an unnamed woman. The character of this anonymous protagonist is conjured through their memories, which collectively offer a kaleidoscopic vision of her persona. Set in unfamiliar and unmarked locations, the novel exceeds the confines of singular truths and offers alternative narratives that present a range of "possibilities" for "knowing the protagonist" (Phonglo 933). By transcending the singular perspective, Pariat's work opens up a world of divergent and competing interpretations, destabilising conventional notions of knowledge and perception.

The novel *Seahorse* chronicles the journey of Nehemiah, or Nem, as he traverses from a humble abode in the placid recesses of India to the bustling metropolises of Delhi and London. While the tripartite structure is discernible, its linear and chronological nature is nullified, for it is reminiscent of the cadences of a musical composition, wherein pivotal transitions in Nem's voyage towards self-realisation are marked. The scenes and incidents within these movements ebb and flow through time with alacrity, intertwined by the strands of memory. As Nem himself attests, memory is an elusive entity that returns to us only on the proviso of its loss. To regain it, we must first acknowledge its absence and comprehend that the world, as we knew it, has ceased to exist:

> Although the paradox of memory is that it gives you back what you had on condition that you know it has been lost. To regain it, you must remember it

> has gone; to remake the world, you need to first understand that it has ended. (Pariat, *Seahorse* 66)

It is through these vestiges of the past that the link between the expired and the extant is forged, and it is from these fragments of memory that the novel's narrative edifice is constructed.

The novel *Seahorse* delves into the complex social and cultural fabric of India and England during the 1990s-2000s as it traces the journey of Nem, a student hailing from Meghalaya who enrolled in English Literature at Delhi University. During his time in New Delhi, Nem is struck by the allure of Nicholas, a visiting art professor from London. The trajectory of Nem's life takes a momentous turn when he receives the news of his friend, Lenny's demise, who took his own life following his ostracism for his homosexual inclinations. This event transpires as Nem becomes enmeshed in Nicholas' world, stumbling into his life like a wounded bird.

The ensuing relationship between Nem and Nicholas burns like a bright flame but is evanescent and excruciating. Nem finds solace in classical music and the mesmerising display of exotic fish, particularly seahorses, in Nicholas' aquarium. The idyllic dream is, however, rudely disrupted by the sudden appearance of Nicholas' stepsister, later revealed as Nicholas' lover. Following Nicholas' unanticipated departure, Nem is scarred by the double tragedy of Lenny's death and the loss of his relationship with Nicholas. Nevertheless, Nem rises from the ashes, establishing himself as a successful critic in the burgeoning Indian art world at the turn of the millennium. However, his professional ascent culminates in a sojourn to London, bringing him within the orbit of Nicholas' increasingly erratic behaviour.

Through Nem's encounters with Lenny, Nicholas, and Myra, the author weaves a tapestry of love, loss, pain, betrayal, and trauma within a society that punishes divergence and upholds conformity. The novel unearths the complexities of societal norms and the human psyche, underscoring the power dynamics at play in interpersonal relationships while also exploring the psychological toll of being a non-conformist in a world that demands conformity.

Pariat's *Seahorse* resounds with the echoes of the myth of Poseidon and Pelops as it unravels into a bildungsroman of extraordinary depth and complexity. This *tour de force* was celebrated for its sheer brilliance, securing its place as a finalist for 'The Hindu Best Fiction' award in 2015. The novel emerges as a riveting mystery and a fervid love story imbued with a richly nuanced sensibility that evokes the inexorable pull of desire. Pariat's narrative traverses a universe of sexuality that eschews the rigid confines of fixed identities, transcending the need for compartmentalisation. Rather, desire emerges as a fluid medium of expression, unrestrained by the limitations of gender binaries. It unfolds as a facet of being akin to the proclivities of the seahorse, which evinces an unbridled preference for both sexes. This, perhaps, suggests that nature manifests fundamental equality across all beings, where pleasure transcends mere procreation and becomes an end in itself, a facet of human experience that is deeply subjective and personal. It is in this light that one can discern the beauty of diversity that permeates the cosmos, a vital component of the universe of the creator. This theme propels the book to new heights, imbuing it with a sense of daring and openness that invites further interpretation.

Drawing from a culture that exhibits a tolerant disposition towards homoeroticism, Pariat seeks to underscore the dissonance between traditional mores and modernity's preoccupation with sexual nonconformity. In the story, Lenny's discovery in bed with another boy by his father has resulted in his being placed in a psychiatric facility situated far beyond the outskirts of the town. Nehemiah recollects how the town's ethos of reputation looms large, with whispers spreading like "tangled gardens, abandoned in their wishes, words flitting like butterflies from tongue to tongue" (Pariat 56). As a "respectable man of the church", and also since Lenny's mother is "the principal of the well-reputed convent school" in their town, Lenny's father deems his son's same-sex attraction as a "sickness" that requires a cure (Pariat 56). This notion of pathologising same-sex attraction is redolent of the narratives of sickness advanced by the emergent human sciences of psychology. In the mid-twentieth century, homosexuality was commonly associated with mental sickness:

> The majority of empirical work in psychology in the mid-twentieth century continued to be conducted with clinical or institutionalised samples of same-sex-attracted individuals (Hammack et al. 222).

The discursive formation of psychology in the early twentieth century operated to establish a link between homosexuality and psychopathology. Studies such as L. Bollmeier's "A Paranoid Mechanism in Male Overt Homosexuality" (1938) and M.H. Krout's "Emotional Factors in the Etiology of Stammering" (1936) claimed that homosexuality was linked to paranoia and stammering, respectively. Such studies, as exemplified by W. Stekel's "Is Homosexuality Curable?" (1930), pathologised homosexuality as a malady to be cured. However, these claims, according to Hammack et al., were undermined by the problematic epistemological foundation on which they were based. These studies predominantly focused on individuals with mental illness, which resulted in circular reasoning where homosexuality was linked to mental illness, but the only evidence for this claim came from the mentally ill (221). In these early works on homosexuality, a sickness script was used to interpret cases rather than subjecting the assumption of homosexuality as a pathology to critical scrutiny.

Lenny's tragic experience in the story is emblematic of how societal norms compel conformity and suppress those who fail to conform. His story evokes the notion, as expounded by Foucault that sterile behaviour was perceived as abnormal and therefore ostracised, silenced, and erased (*History of Sexuality* 3 and 4). The emergence of the category of homosexual in the nineteenth century is an important subject for Foucault. He suggests that sexuality, including homosexuality, must be seen as a constructed category of knowledge rather than a newly discovered identity. The notion that same-sex attraction existed prior to the emergence of the homosexual identity is not new. Yet, it was only in the nineteenth century that the category of "homosexual" came to be recognised and defined as a distinct "species" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 43). In the nineteenth century, sexuality became the subject of a discourse that fostered a classificatory division between the norm and the perverse.

Nem, too, has been victimised by this discourse, as he recounts how his father disapproved of his sexual orientation. He compares himself to a sapling his father had brought home from the market. The sapling was planted by his father, who thought it was a flowering hydrangea, but it instead grew into a tangling creeper with dark leaves and rare blossoms. Nem identifies himself with the sapling, having grown into an identity that his father has refused to accept:

> He planted [the sapling] in our garden thinking it was a flowering hydrangea, but it grew into something else. A great tangling creeper with dark leaves and rare orange blossoms. And he'd stand in front of it bewildered.
>
> *What is this?*
>
> Sometimes, he [his father] looked at me the same way. (Pariat, *Seahorse* 42)

The discourse surrounding Lenny in the story illustrates the persistence of a cultural narrative that positions him as a perverse and deviant figure, a case of arrested development, and an aberration from the normative heterosexual standard. Such reductive and essentialist categorisations subjected Lenny to various forms of social control, marginalisation, and subordination. In this context, the 'shame' attached to homosexuality is palpable, as demonstrated by Nem's father's hesitant and timorous query about whether Lenny had made any inappropriate advances towards his son:

> 'Did he do anything to you?'
>
> I was much too taken aback to reply.
>
> 'Tell me, did he?'
>
> It grew, the look in his eyes. Twisting on his tongue.
>
> 'Did he . . . touch you?' (*Seahorse* 57)

His belief that Lenny requires treatment and must be shunned further underscores the pathologising discourse or sickness script surrounding non-normative sexualities.

This is epitomised by Nehemiah's exile to a Christian institution in Delhi, which is ostensibly founded on "good wholesome Christian principles" (58).

The discourse surrounding Lenny is thus a manifestation of the tension between the normalising impulse of societal norms and the disruptive potential of minority subjectivities. This dynamic reflects the broader cultural anxiety surrounding sexuality and the desire to police and regulate non-normative desires and identities. Pariat's depiction of Lenny invites us to critically reflect on the ways in which cultural narratives and discourses shape our understanding of sexuality and the implications of these narratives for the marginalised and the oppressed.

When Nem was sent to Delhi by his parents, ironically, he was exposed to another same-sex relationship with Nicholas, of which Nem, in recounting this experience, speaks of being "offered to Nicholas on a plate," a turn of phrase that suggests a predetermined destiny (Pariat 58). The allusions to the obscure Greek myth of Poseidon and Pelops resonate here with a certain timbre as if the historical echoes of antiquity were being transmitted through the mists of time to articulate themselves in the present. According to the ancient myth, King Tantalus killed his son Pelops and served his flesh to the gods. However, the gods eventually discovered the deception, and Pelops was brought back to life. Pelops went on to become a lover of the sea god Poseidon, who gifted him with a chariot pulled by swift, winged horses. In an interview with *Verve Magazine*, Pariat explicates this myth and expounds upon the significance of the title '*Seahorse*,' illuminating the significance of the aquatic creature:

> The Greek myth that *Seahorse* parallels is the story of Poseidon, god of the sea, and his relationship with a younger male lover named Pelops. Apart from the obvious—Poseidon's carriage was drawn by seahorses, or 'hippo campus' (sea monsters)—the seahorse also serves as a symbol of resilience, beauty, and queerness. ("All Labels Bother Me")

Pariat's deployment of the myth of Poseidon and Pelops as a conceptual frame for Nem and Nicholas's relationship is a provocative move, one that transcends mere allusion. The significance of this myth is not limited to the literal representation of

Poseidon's carriage being drawn by seahorses, or 'hippocampus' (sea monsters), but rather extends to the broader symbolism of the seahorse as a metaphor for resilience, beauty, and queerness:

> Seahorses are strange creatures. . . . They mate for long, if not for life. . . . They belong to that rarest of fish families marked by male pregnancy.
>
> And, most marvellous of all, they dance. . . . They change colour. (*Seahorse* 114)

The seahorse is a creature of great intrigue and marvel, for it possesses an astonishing resilience and beauty that are not immediately discernible at first glance. In much the same way, queer individuals frequently find themselves relegated to the margins of society and subject to discrimination, despite their inherent strength and beauty. By evoking the seahorse as an emblem, Pariat highlights the beauty and resilience inherent to queer identity. Additionally, the seahorse can also be regarded as a symbol of queerness in its own right. Its distinctive appearance and unconventional behaviour serve to subvert and challenge established gender norms and expectations, thus rendering it a formidable symbol of queer identity and resistance to normative culture. Furthermore, the seahorse's capacity to shift its hue and shape reinforces this metaphor, embodying the fluidity and adaptability that typify queer identities.

What is discernible here is the author's emphasis on the flexibility and fluidity of individual identity, highlighting the queer body as a site of contestation against the heteronormative and heterosexist social order. As Hostetler and Herdt assert, identity and subject positions are "fluid, dynamic, and multiply determined," (252), which raises questions about the ontological foundations of the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian'. They further argue that the "queer" signifies an "open, multiperspectival, and fluid . . . conceptual space from which to contest . . . a heteronormative and heterosexist social order" (253). This fluidity of identity is perceptible in the text when Nicholas remarks on the sculpture's flexibility and fluidity of value and identity:

> This is how I looked at sculpture, as fundamentally social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans. Often, religious historians and art historians privilege the moment of an object's creation as the essential meaning of the object . . . but some of us hold that subsequent reinterpretations are equally important and equally worthy of enquiry. Would a person's biography be confined to an account of his or her birth? No. Objects come to be animated with new significance. (*Seahorse* 160)

Nicholas's remark here highlights the idea that the meaning of any object is not fixed or inherent but is instead constructed through interactions with human subjects. This echoes Foucault's notion of "discursive" formations, which are systems of language and knowledge that shape the way we perceive and understand the world around us (*The Archaeology* 48-49). In this notion, the meaning of the sculpture is not a given but is instead produced and reproduced through ongoing interactions and interpretations. Moreover, Nicholas's critique of the privileging of the moment of an object's creation by art historians and religious historians highlights the influence of power relations on the construction of meaning. Foucault's concept of power relations suggests that knowledge and meaning are not neutral or objective but are shaped by the social and historical context in which they are produced: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (*The History of Sexuality* 93). Thus, Nicholas's argument that subsequent reinterpretations are equally important and worthy of inquiry challenges dominant discourses and assert the agency of individuals in shaping the meaning of things. This exemplifies the poststructuralist perspective on the fluidity of identity and the social construction of meaning, drawing attention to the role of power relations and discursive formations in shaping our understanding of the world around us. In an interview with *Fried Eyed Media,* Pariat discloses the inspiration behind her novel:

> I found moving from short stories to a novel profoundly terrifying. All these ideas I harbored in my head about a ménage à trois set in North Delhi

> involving Nehemiah, Nicholas, and Myra, swirled around with no particular shape or form. Until, serendipitously, I came across Robert Graves' The Greek Myths, immersive and enchanting. I chose the lesser known myth about Poseidon and his relationship with a young male devotee Pelops because it allowed me to explore a number of themes I held close with this book—the fluidity of gender, love, memory, time—and also because it was about a person breaking apart and being put back together, and seemed most close to life. ("I'm What's called an Ethnic Mongrel")

In a society that fervently adheres to the discourse of heteronormativity, behaviours that fall beyond the accepted boundaries are swiftly deemed shameful and disgraceful. The normative narrative constructs rigid dichotomies between permissible and deviant relationships and desires. Those who exist outside of the normative script are often marginalised, excluded, and labelled as 'perverse' and 'deviant'. Such is the case with the two female protagonists in "Boats on Land," who, in their own estimation, feel like boats stranded on land, unable to navigate the waters of normative society: "Don't you feel that way? This awkwardness, with your place in the world" (Pariat, "Boats on Land" 198). The awkward and peculiar sense of otherness they experience is a direct result of the normative discourse's insistence on heteronormativity as the only valid way of being in the world. However, this otherness also represents a challenge to the normative discourse, as it disrupts its claims to universality and exposes its reliance on exclusionary practices to maintain its authority. The two female protagonists, in their resistance to the normative narrative, provide a glimpse into the possibilities of other ways of being and loving that exist beyond the confines of heteronormativity.

"Boats on Land" is a story that traces the lesbian encounter between an unnamed narrator from Shillong and an unnamed girl from Chandbari, a tea estate in Assam. The absence of names in the story for the two female characters here invites an interpretive space for openness and exploration. Such a narrative gesture could be construed as the author's embodiment of an artistic strategy that embodies a compelling portrayal of characters. Through this narrative strategy, Pariat ventures to illuminate the latent reservations that permeate societal structures, particularly in

relation to sexuality diverging from normative conventions. The withholding of names becomes a mechanism by which the author articulates a profound commentary on the multifaceted nature of human sexuality, showcasing the vast spectrum of identities that exist beyond the constraints of societal expectations. In the absence of prescribed labels, these characters transcend pre-defined categories, empowering individuals whose sexualities defy conventional boundaries to freely manifest their varied and authentic selves. This deliberate omission engenders a profound sense of agency, permitting sexual orientations of marginalised individuals to reclaim their narratives and assert the complexity and fluidity of their own desires and identities.

The narrative of "Boats on Land" centres on the narrator's recollections of her relationship with the girl during her family's winter holiday at Chandbari. At its core, the story is a poignant exploration of a young girl's discovery of her sexual identity and the profound impact it has on her psyche. From the outset, the narrative foregrounds the narrator's professed attraction to boys, which is evidenced by her relationship with a young boy named Jason. However, the narrator's encounter with the girl in Assam introduces a new and transformative element into her life. Through a series of slow and deliberate interactions, the narrator's experience with the girl leads to a complete reconfiguration of her sexual identity:

> On our way back, I was mostly silent . . . Everything seemed unreal . . . changing, I felt, on a screen at a distance. (Pariat, "Boats on Land" 199)

The physical relationship between the narrator and the 'You' in the story serves as a transformative experience, one that fundamentally alters the narrator's sexual identity and her perception of the world. The story stands as a powerful testament to the notion, espoused by certain queer theories, that sexual identity is never fixed but rather is subject to constant flux and transformation. Indeed, contemporary theorists argue that identity and sexuality are inherently social constructs shaped and moulded by the prevailing discourses of power. Postmodernist thinkers have long maintained that identity is never fixed but rather a product of discourse, a construction of social norms and conventions. As early as 1968, Mary MacIntosh noted that society often used the label of 'deviant' to control those whose

sexuality fell outside the normative narrative, thus reinforcing the constructed binary between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’: “The way in which people become labeled as homosexual can now be seen as an important social process connected with mechanisms of social control” (184). Michel Foucault likewise located sexuality and identity “within the structures and discourses of power,” arguing that certain forms of sexuality were constructed as “unnatural” and “evil” in order to reinforce dominant power structures and maintain social control (qtd. in Nayar 186).

“Boats on Land” thus serves as a powerful indictment of the limitations imposed by heteronormative gender and sexual identities. It highlights the ways in which heteronormative narratives can constrain and circumscribe the possibilities for authentic self-expression and self-realisation. Through the narrator’s journey of discovery and transformation, the story gestures towards the possibility of new and alternative ways of being and loving that challenge the dominant heteronormative discourse. In so doing, it invites us to consider the ways in which our own identities are shaped and moulded by the prevailing discourses of power and to imagine the liberatory potential of radical forms of self-expression and self-creation. This aspect of the potential for resistance is evident in the narrator’s assertion that she perceives the world more lucidly when submerged in water:

> Don’t you feel that way? This awkwardness with your place in the world. You know, when I put my head under water, I hear nothing, I see clearer. (“Boats on Land” 198)

Similar to the 1999 United Kingdom television series *Queer as Folk*, which vividly depicts the gay scene as a realm characterised by brightness, exuberance, liveliness, and revelry, distinct from the perceived dullness of the heterosexual world, the narrative act of ‘seeing clearer’ beneath the water’s surface in the story assumes profound significance. In this context, the submerged realm serves as a metaphorical signifier of the queer world, a domain portrayed by Pariat as an oasis of joy and euphoria—a vast expanse of water that beckons their metaphorical boat towards its destined voyage. The notion of ‘seeing clearer under water’ thus assumes the role of an evocative motif, suggesting a deliberate artistic intent to portray the lesbian/queer

world with heightened brilliance and dynamism, surpassing the portrayal of the straight world. This thematic resonance finds a parallel manifestation in *Queer as Folk*, where the central characters, epitomising beauty, well-being, and affluence, fashion queerness as an embodiment of trendiness and sensuality.

Much like the boats that gain greater autonomy as they move away from the shore, the narrator endeavours to position herself at a distance from the constraints imposed by society to achieve a sense of personal authenticity and freedom. In other words, analogous to the progressive attainment of freedom experienced by the boats as they venture into the vast expanse of the open sea, the two central characters navigate a trajectory towards augmented autonomy, estranging themselves from the confining parameters of societal restraints and the prevalent narratives endorsing heteronormativity. Concurrently, their transformative passage engenders a resolute endeavour to question and dismantle the entrenched heterosexual assumptions that have systematically relegated non-normative sexual orientations and identities to the peripheries of social acceptance and recognition. In this unfolding narrative, these two characters navigate the unpredictable currents of resistance, charting a course towards a more inclusive and emancipated future. This mode of resistance underscores the idea of ambivalence, as the narrator oscillates between two opposing positions, searching for a place of belonging that is neither constrained nor too estranged from the world around her. Through this resistant act of claiming a space for herself, the narrator pushes against the boundaries of normative discourse and asserts her right to exist on her own terms.

In Pariat's other story, "Secret Corridors," a compelling exploration unfolds as the protagonist, Natalie, relentlessly strives to establish meaningful connections with her fellow schoolgirls. This evocative account delves into the intricate interplay between Natalie's sexuality and her consciousness, illuminating the profound impact it wields on her identity (Goswami 29). Over time, Natalie triumphs in forging a potent bond with another woman, navigating the hidden depths of her heart's secret corridors. However, the weight of societal conventions loom large, as the forbidden affection and palpable sensations she harbours for her classmate, Iba, remain stifled within the shadows. Society's vehement condemnation of lesbian encounters and

homosexual identities renders Natalie's truth inaccessible, shrouded in the veil of secrecy and deemed morally reprehensible.

Centred around the youthful protagonist, Natalie, an eighth-grade student in a convent school in Shillong, the narrative intricately explores her ardent yearning for intimate companionship with individuals of the same sex. It also narrates Natalie's unrelenting desire to garner acceptance and establish friendships among her female peers:

> During a lunch break, a band of girls took over the only sunny corner of the summer house in the playground. . . . Sitting slightly outside the sacred circle was Natalie, unsure yet whether she was fully part of the gang. She tried joining in the conversation but found it was dominated by Doreen and Miranda jostling like skilled duellers for Iba's attention. (Pariat, "Boats on Land*"* 84)

Natalie's attraction towards Iba transcends the realm of mere admiration for an intellectually superior classmate. Her gravitational pull and irresistible longing to be in close proximity to Iba delve into profound depths beyond superficial fascination, firmly intertwined with the intricacies of Natalie's sexuality. It becomes indisputably apparent, right from the inception of the narrative, that her attraction to Iba is imbued with a sexual dimension, specifically of a lesbian nature:

> It was a mouth that made Natalie think of forbidden things. . . . That morning, the intricacies of chemistry didn't interest her as much as Iba's mouth; and the face to which was just as attractive it belonged, she thought. . . . She liked Iba's slanting eyes and the smooth plane of her cheeks. (Pariat, "Secret Corridors" 81)

The narrative also conveys Natalie's acute consciousness regarding the taboo nature of her attraction towards a fellow female classmate. The latent presence of same-sex desire within Natalie is further illustrated as the story progresses, reaching a crescendo when Iba, the object of her enumeration, playfully engages in a

provocative act of ‘licking’ during a specific moment. The subsequent portrayal of Natalie’s reactions to this act provides elucidation as follows:

> She (Iba) pretended to nip at Miranda’s hand, then stopped in front of Natalie and brushed the tip of her tongue against Natalie’s cheek. It was an electric shock; Natalie’s stomach fluttered, something inside her constricted like a coiled snake. (Pariat, “Secret Corridors” 91)

Here, it is essential to acknowledge Natalie’s developmental stage as an eighth-grade student, wherein she is at the initial juncture of her journey to comprehend and explore her own sexuality, which unequivocally manifests as lesbian in its orientation. Wrestling with the intricate process of self-discovery, Natalie grapples with the profound task of reconciling her burgeoning sexual identity while fervently yearning to establish an intimate connection with Iba. However, restrained by a lack of fortitude, Natalie hesitates to disclose her sentiments, choosing instead to conceal them within the enigmatic recesses of her innermost being, the metaphorical ‘secret corridors’ of her heart.

The very essence of the story’s title, “Secret Corridors,” assumes a suggestive and symbolic quality. It beckons us to enter the evocative realm where the story unfolds—the hidden recesses of Natalie’s psyche, traversing the intricate passages that interweave with her emerging sexuality. This subtle and nuanced exploration delves into the depths of her being, where an insatiable yearning for fulfilment perpetually resides. Within this profound exploration, she encounters peculiar and forbidden sensations that entwine her soul, fueling her affection for Iba. However, the socio-cultural milieu surrounding her vehemently suppresses and marginalises the expression of such desires. Consequently, secrecy becomes a necessity, compelling Natalie to confine these intense emotions within the concealed chambers of her mind. This clandestine state, emblematic of a larger discourse on societal constraints and the marginalisation of non-normative desires, invokes Bhabha’s ideas of liminality and cultural hybridity. Natalie’s yearnings, existing within the interstices of societal norms, disrupt the dominant heteronormative framework and are forced to find refuge in the interstitial spaces of her consciousness.

In the interplay between societal disapproval and the inherent human desire for connection, Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' becomes pertinent. Natalie's innermost corridors, embodying this third space, become a site of resistance and self-determination, allowing her to negotiate her desires and navigate her identity away from the gaze of a society that constrains and stigmatises. Bhabha has adeptly employed the concept of 'third space', 'liminality', and 'hybridity', often utilising them interchangeably to signify the dynamic "fluidity" and intricate "negotiations" inherent in the formation of cultural identities. Bhabha posits that ascribing cultural distinctions, encompassing gender and sexual identities, to preconceived fixed attributes is fallacious. Instead, he posits that the articulation of identities is an "ongoing," perpetual process of "negotiation" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 2), necessitating a continuous interplay and reciprocal exchange of performative elements.

In this connection, it is necessary to remember how Butler contends that gender identities are not inherent but are enacted and reproduced through performances: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). The repetition of these performances, associated with femininity or masculinity, bestows upon them a semblance of naturalness and coherence. Bhabha and Butler, however, do not overlook the corporeal reality of the body or the presence of sexual desires. Rather, they urge us to scrutinise the "institutions and practices" that render certain bodies and desires "recognizable" while rendering others "unthinkable" (Khoja-Moolji 398-99).

Both poststructuralist and postcolonial theories advance the performative nature of sexual identities within power-laden hierarchies. Nevertheless, when behaviours surpass established classifications and individuals are unable to place themselves within the homosexual-heterosexual binary, the fragility of the repressive representational scheme becomes apparent. Bhabha identifies these moments of in-betweenness or excess as the "third space" ("The Third Space" 211), where performances disrupt normative binaries and elude neat categorisations. In this interstitial realm, subjectivities emerge with heightened complexity and ambivalence.

These performances exceed mere aggregation, incorporating histories and engendering novel structures of authority and political initiatives beyond conventional comprehension:

> . . . this third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, and new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha, "The Third Space" 211)

Hence, the narrative of "Secret Corridors," framed within the theoretical tapestry of Bhabha's ideas, invites us to contemplate the complex interplay of power, identity, and desire. Natalie's secret corridors serve as a metaphorical threshold, where she grapples with societal norms, negotiates her own subjectivity, and finds solace in the pursuit of authentic selfhood, even as she is compelled to keep her desires hidden from the scrutiny of the world.

After Iba's departure, Natalie discovers a more compatible companion in Carmel, a fellow classmate who, akin to Natalie, has undergone the distress and exclusion inflicted by their classmates. An instantaneous bond is forged between them, driven by a profound sense of affinity. It is noteworthy that the connection Natalie eventually establishes with Carmel transcends the realm of emotions and ventures into the realm of physicality:

> Carmel put her hand on Natalie's knee. Her fingers felt hot against her skin. She leaned in closer, her hair undone, framing her face. Natalie closed her eyes before their lips met. It was nothing like she'd ever felt before. A low roar filled her ears, as though she was listening to a shell and could hear the sea. Something inside her unraveled, it uncoiled to the floor, and filled the room, every inch of its dusty corners. The world, with its scorn and derision, receded, and she was left with Carmel's mouth, which was soft and warm and tasted of tears. For a moment, the ghosts around them, and within, fell silent. (Pariat, "Secret Corridors" 94)

Thus, the lesbian encounter unfolds as a transformative experience for Natalie, engendering a sense of profound fulfilment and enabling her to forge an indomitable

'powerful bond'. This encounter, laden with reward and empowerment, serves as a conduit to uncharted realms of self-exploration, where Natalie delves into the depths of her authentic self. By bestowing her with newfound strength, it emboldens her to confront and vanquish the virulent scorn and derision perpetuated by an overwhelmingly heteronormative society steeped in homophobia. Furthermore, this empowering encounter serves as a potent instrument for reconciling the haunting apparitions of rejection, stigmatisation, and self-hatred that often plague individuals ensnared within the constricting confines of a society that perpetuates heteronormativity. It acts as a beacon of resilience, illuminating the path towards self-acceptance and liberation from the oppressive clutches of societal norms and expectations.

In Pariat's fictional oeuvre, the portrayal of romantic relationships exhibits a distinctive pattern whereby same-sex relationships are often imbued with therapeutic qualities and psychological fulfilment. Conversely, heterosexual or opposite-sex relationships are often depicted as culminating in despair, animosity, and desolation. Characters such as Nem, Nicholas, and the unnamed female narrators in *The Nine-Chambered Heart* and "Boats on Land," among others, exist on the periphery of societal norms. Remarkably absent in these characters are the pervasive feelings of 'guilt' and 'shame' that tend to accompany such transgressions. These characters defiantly challenge and subvert the normative discourses imposed by a society primarily anchored in heteronormativity. The conventional boundaries imposed by religious and societal institutions, meticulously constructed to demarcate the contours of acceptable behaviour, are persistently transgressed by the protagonists in Pariat's literary realm. This subversion exposes the inherent fragility of normative structures and sheds light on the transformative potential of marginalised subjectivities. By dismantling the hegemonic discourse, Pariat's characters become catalysts for dismantling oppressive frameworks, inviting alternative modes of existence and challenging the status quo. Through their resistance and resilience, they forge paths of resistance that rupture the stifling grip of a homogenising society, offering glimpses of emancipatory possibilities that transcend narrow conceptions of love, desire, and relationality.

In consonance with the postmodernist ethos, Pariat's narratives breathe life into the marginalised individuals of society, granting them a resounding voice that captures their lived experiences and unveils realities that would otherwise remain obscured within the grand narratives of mainstream discourse. Indeed, her ambitious endeavour in her sophomore novel, *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, may be discerned as an embodiment of what postmodernists would designate as "fragmented narratives" or "shifting perspectives," reverberating with the fluid nature of truth itself. Engaging in daring experimentation with narrative structure, Pariat deftly employs a fragmented narrative technique, wherein the story unfurls through the multifarious prisms of nine unnamed distinct characters, each recollecting their encounters and memories with the enigmatic protagonist. This narrative modality, rooted in the polyphony of subjective viewpoints, boldly challenges the very notion of an overarching, authoritative narrative voice. The fragmented structure of the novel's narrative echoes the postmodernist scepticism towards grand narratives, eschewing their monolithic claims in favour of embracing the kaleidoscope of perspectives and the multiplicity of interpretations.

The novel delves into the life of an unnamed young woman as she navigates diverse cities and encounters various individuals. Notably, both the cities and the characters remain nameless, yet they retain an inherent comprehensibility. As aptly suggested by the title, the narrative unfolds in a series of nine distinct sections; each presented through the perspective of a different narrator. These narrators address the woman at different junctures of her life, spanning from her formative years to her maturity. The text deliberately transcends the notion of a singular viewpoint or 'truth,' instead offering an array of alternative narratives that invite the reader into a realm of multifaceted possibilities for understanding the protagonist. Both the central character and the narrators themselves are devoid of names. Yet, each narrator is assigned a symbolic title, such as 'The Saint,' 'The Butcher,' 'The Caretaker,' 'The Undertaker,' 'The Professor,' 'The Florist,' 'The Crusader,' 'The Lighthouse Keeper,' and 'The Sailor'. These designations do not strictly correspond to the characters' professions but rather encompass their innate qualities and, to some extent, their significance in the protagonist's life.

Similar to what she has done in "Boats on Land" and "Secret Corridors", Pariat in *The Nine-Chambered Heart* intriguingly abstains from providing names for her characters and places, leaving them anonymous throughout the narrative. This absence of names serves as a deliberate narrative choice to avoid biases and to let only the perspectives and emotions shine as they paint the picture of the protagonist. By not providing names for the characters, Pariat challenges the conventional notion that identities are stable and easily identifiable. The absence of names contributes to the deconstruction of fixed identities and encourages readers to question the stability of identity constructs.

In an interview with *HarperBroadcast*, Pariat responds to the question concerning the intentional absence of names for main characters in *The Nine-Chambered Heart*:

> I think I was interested in exploring how we have stories about the people that we know in our lives. We tell ourselves, these stories about other people that we encounter, that we love, that we sort of make a part of our lives. And I think I was interested in examining or exploring how if you place all of these stories together, perhaps you might get a sense of what this one person is like. Of course, the point is that we never quite entirely know somebody even if we spend all our lives with them. We never quite know them entirely. And so through all of these different relationships, you see that . . . you sense that . . . how they are with each other or they love each other because they're at a particular place in life. ("In Conversation with Janice Pariat")

Pariat's narrative approach in *The Nine-Chambered Heart* not only refrains from assigning names to her characters but also avoids imposing fixed identities upon them, particularly the central character. This deliberate choice reflects Pariat's resistance to rigid categories of sexual identity, which she rather perceives as fragmented, fluid, and performative. This aligns with Butler's critique of identity classifications such as 'gay' or 'lesbian,' which resonates with the intellectual movement she spearheads: queer theory. Drawing inspiration from Derrida, Butler's gender discourse challenges essentialist and biological conceptions of gender and

sexual identity, advocating instead for a performative understanding. In her widely anthologised essay "Imitation and gender insubordination" (1991), Butler dismisses identity categories, including 'lesbian' and 'gay,' as tools employed by regulatory systems, serving either as normative categories within oppressive structures or as rallying points for a contestation against such oppression (Butler 558).

In contending that gender identity not only operates independently of biological sex but, more crucially, that no behavioural traits can be exclusively attributed to one sex or the other, Butler effectively invokes the pivotal themes of post-structuralism as exemplified by Derrida and Lacan. On the one hand, by positing that all identities are performative, "Butler is evoking the Derridean notion of 'freeplay,' by removing the centrality of the sex-gender correlation that is so naturalized in contemporary society" (Han 90). Moreover, the conceptualisation of gender as a simulacrum or a copy without an original, coupled with Butler's critique of an essentialist notion of foundational masculine or feminine behaviours, evokes resonances with Derrida's deconstructive analysis of the mythical 'origin' or what he terms 'the Centre'. By problematising the notion of a singular, stable origin or essence of gender, Butler destabilises the entrenched understanding of gender as a fixed and predetermined construct. This disruption exposes the constructed nature of gender and highlights the performative aspects inherent in its manifestation. Drawing on Derrida's critique of origin and myth, Butler challenges the privileged status granted to normative gender identities, opening up avenues for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender as a social and discursive phenomenon:

> Logically, this notion of an "origin" is suspect, for how can something operate as an origin if there are no secondary consequences which retrospectively confirm the originality of that origin? The origin requires its derivatives in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives. Hence, if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin. (Butler 563)

Butler posits that the construct of heterosexuality is deemed as the ‘centre’ or the ‘origin’, while all other sexual identities are considered mere replicas, imitations, or counterfeit manifestations. However, she argues that the operation of homophobia extends beyond perceiving homosexual identity solely as a derivative or imitation of heterosexual identity. It is, in fact, an endorsement of a knowledge system that bestows primacy upon the originary or the authentic (Han 90). Within this paradigm, any forms of imitation are systematically delegitimised and marginalised. Put differently, heterosexuality, presumed as the foundational form of sexuality, relies on the existence of its imitative counterparts to uphold its inherent primacy. According to Butler, the construction of identity, in a broader sense, is not firmly grounded in a state of ‘ontological security’ (or a stable mental state as purported by Anthony Giddens) but rather constitutes an inherently unstable and fluid process. This destabilising quality, contrary to conventional associations with unease, is inverted in Butler’s framework. She argues that the very instability and unclassifiability of identity do not elicit existential anxiety but instead offer a particular kind of “pleasure” (Butler 558).

In *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, Pariat adeptly avoids the inclination to assign any explicit sexual categorisation to the central protagonist. Instead, the protagonist is portrayed as an individual earnestly seeking connection and meaningful relationships. This theme becomes evident from the very outset in the initial section entitled ‘The Saint,’ where the protagonist’s teacher, assuming the role of narrator, recounts and reminisces about his relationship with the protagonist. The protagonist’s yearning for connection and meaningful relationships persists throughout subsequent parts, such as ‘The Butcher’ and ‘The Caretaker’. Unfortunately, all of these relationships ultimately unravel into states of desperation and despair. It is only when the protagonist encounters a woman referred to as “the undertaker” by the author, a symbol of shared painful past experiences, that a transformative and therapeutic bond is formed between the two characters. This newfound relationship proves to be fruitful and healing for both individuals involved. The narrator discloses that they have both discovered a commonality in being involved with someone who was married, indicating a shared history: “We discover we’ve both been with someone

who was married" (Pariat, *The Nine-Chambered* 69). Furthermore, their similarity extends to the fact that they are now engaged in a same-sex relationship for the first time.

Pariat, however, deliberately refrains from rigidly categorising the characters' sexual orientation and identity, choosing instead to leave their identities as both 'unstable' and 'continuously evolving'. This choice underscores the inherent instability and fluidity of their identities. This concept is also reflected when the protagonist defines an "artwork" to the narrator as something whose meaning is contingent upon individual perspectives, highlighting the subjective nature of interpretation:

> 'It is an artwork,' you tell me.
>
> 'Signifying what?'
>
> 'Whatever you wish it to.' Nowadays, you add, everything is non-essentialist. (79)

Through skilful narrative technique, Pariat invites readers to explore the complexities of identity formation and the multifaceted nature of human connections, avoiding the imposition of fixed labels and embracing the ever-shifting intricacies of personal experiences. Echoing the astute observations articulated by Butler, this very instability and unclassifyability of the protagonist's identity elicit not existential anxiety but rather a distinct form of pleasurable engagement.

In this sense, *The Nine-Chambered Heart* effectively embodies the quintessence of postmodernism as it navigates the realms of identity, subjectivity, and the ever-shifting nature of truth, all of which stand as prominent focal points within the purview of postmodern literature. The narrative unfolds through a spectrum of distinct narrators, each offering a disparate rendition of the central character, thereby laying bare the innate instability and subjectivity inherent in personal narratives. This intricate tapestry of perspectives places readers in the role of navigators through a labyrinth of subjectivities, evoking introspection into the essence of truth and the elusive contours of identity.

The novel takes a bold departure from linear storytelling conventions by embracing non-linear temporal constructs and fragmented narrative techniques. This subversion of traditional linearity facilitates an exploration of time and memory that evades hierarchical confines, echoing the postmodern suspicion of linear advancement and predetermined temporal paradigms. By inviting readers to embrace the fractured and non-sequential facets of human experience, the novel effectively contests conventional narrative frameworks. Through its innovative narrative experimentation and thematic explorations, the novel serves as an invitation to readers to critically examine fixed meanings, adopt a stance that accommodates diverse perspectives, and grapple with the intricate art of storytelling within the context of a postmodern milieu.

In elucidating the representation of queer desire and sexual identities in selected literary works by Janice Pariat, this chapter illuminates the subtle nuances that inform our understanding of human sexuality and its myriad expressions. By foregrounding characters that embody marginalised sexualities and non-normative desires, Pariat's fiction serves as an artistic site of contestation where the boundaries of identity are continuously renegotiated. Her literary representations disrupt the hegemonic discourses that have historically pathologised and subjugated queer identities.

Situating her fictional representations within relevant theoretical frameworks, this analysis has underscored the destabilising effect of her narrative techniques. In particular, drawing on seminal postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers, the unstable and fluid quality of the identities she portrays manifests a form of subversive resistance. This unsettling of normative sexual and gender categories opens up new possibilities for authentic self-articulation beyond the circumscription of dominant cultural narratives. Her literary aesthetic embodies the radical potential of the creative imagination to dismantle oppressive ideological structures and envision emancipatory horizons for marginalised identities. Her sensitive exploration of liminal spaces and queer experiences provides tantalising glimpses into the latent human capacity for empathy, self-transformation and social change.

## Note

[1]Studies on homosexuality as a case of sickness was carried out by several researchers in the early twentieth century. See L. Dooley (1921), "A Psychoanalytic Study of Manic Depressive Psychosis"; R. M. Riggal (1923), "Homosexuality and Alcoholism"; T. R. Robie (1927), "The Oedipus and Homosexual Complexes in Schizophrenia" and A. H. Sutherland (1914), "Hallucinations and Delusions."

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# CHAPTER FIVE [1]

# VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY: THE POLITICS OF BELONGING AND UNBELONGING

The term ‘Northeast’ in India is commonly used to denote a collective assemblage of eight Indian states, including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Tripura. However, this encompassing designation oversimplifies and neglects the substantial diversity that exists within the region in terms of geography, politics, society, and culture. The utilisation of this terminology is predominantly driven by political expediency and an external vantage point, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of stigmatisation and stereotyping that the Northeast continues to endure. Across the domains of politics, literature, economy, and society, the region has been cast as a mysterious ‘other,’ distinct from the mainland. This positioning reinforces notions of alterity and sustains the marginalisation experienced by the northeast, further entrenching its status as an object of fascination and exoticisation. Northeast India is frequently depicted as a region marked by inter-ethnic conflict, where a range of ethnic groups seek to achieve greater territorial autonomy or assert their right to self-determination. Such demands have resulted in the form of movements for Nagalim, Bodoland, Karbi Anglong, Tipraland, Garoland and Kamtapur. Some of these struggles manifest as “separatist movements,” while others “demand a higher degree of sub-national autonomy” through the establishment of autonomous councils or the formation of new states (Wenner 156). In the case of the northeast, insurgency and ethnic violence can be understood as a mode of articulation and a dialogue of differentiation employed by marginalised communities. It deploys violent political tactics to confront the ongoing dialogue of subordination imposed by the dominant group. For Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, insurgency is a kind of counter-hegemonic struggle led by the oppressed community:

> Insurgency signifies a moment of rupture or disruption that generates a counter-discourse to the already experienced milieu of subjugation, alienation and compulsion. It articulates a sense of dispossession and betrayal tinged with the pathos of coercion and violence. . . . It (insurgency) adopts a politics of combat and resistance to the ongoing discourse of subjugation and derives its sustenance from rupturing the dominant images. (153)

Within the realm of academic inquiry, a particular topic of discussion is the phenomenon of ethno-regionalism, which is often regarded as a product of the unequal development and marginalisation faced by certain groups within society (McDuie-Ra 185-201). This condition of asymmetrical development and marginalisation can manifest in various forms, such as the imposition of language policies, the sensation of "internal colonialism" (Middleton 35-45), the experience of deprivation and exclusion, and the exploitation of resources by external actors. In many cases, the call for territorial autonomy or homelands is a reflection of the sense of exploitation and deprivation experienced by minority groups at the hands of the dominant majority. The concept of territorial autonomy or homelands is not only a political demand but also an expression of a deeper yearning for recognition and self-determination. It is the product of a collective consciousness that has emerged in response to the persistent erasure and subordination of minority cultures and identities. This phenomenon is not unique to any particular region or context but rather a universal feature of the modern world. The tensions and conflicts that arise from these encounters are not merely the result of cultural differences but of the power dynamics that underlie them.

Meghalaya, a state in northeast India, is known for its relatively peaceful atmosphere compared to its neighbouring states, such as Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam, all of which have struggled with the presence of several insurgent groups. However, it cannot be denied that the state is not impervious to the ethnic conflicts that have pervaded it since its formation in 1972, particularly between the indigenous tribal population and the non-tribal settler communities. The gradual influx of economic migrants, primarily non-tribals from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other parts of India, generated a sense of discomfort among the locals as these migrant communities started to dominate various aspects of the state's economy, including business establishments, labour force, and employment opportunities (Haokip 303). Consequently, this led to ethnic riots between the indigenous tribals and migrant non-tribal communities in 1979, 1987, and 1992. Despite this tumultuous past, the mid-1990s saw a discernible shift in the nature of ethnic relations between the communities of the state, with a perceived improvement in the relationship between

the tribals and non-tribals. However, the resurgence of ethnic tensions cannot be denied, and these have now shifted towards the so-called indigenous tribes of the state. These complexities and instabilities of Meghalaya's socio-political landscape cannot be untangled easily, for they are embedded within a broader web of cultural, historical, and economic narratives that define the region's identity.

In discerning the root causes of mounting tensions in the present state of Meghalaya, one might turn to the apprehensions held by the major indigenous tribes – the Khasis, the Jaintias, and the Garos. Indeed, a prevailing fear permeates their collective psyche: the impending prospect of being overwhelmed demographically, culturally, and economically by non-tribals (Lyngdoh and Gassah, 5024). The migratory patterns of non-tribals into this region date back to the earliest days of British colonial occupation in the northeastern expanse. Between 1863 and 1866, Bengali migrants arrived in Meghalaya alongside the British colonial administration to serve as clerks. The Nepalese, or Gorkhas, also migrated to the region as soldiers and auxiliary personnel and subsequently settled as grazers, cultivators, and herders in the forested foothills (Gogoi 361). Over time, they expanded their occupation of grasslands and paddy fields and currently engage in cattle rearing and serving as chowkidars and peons in public and private institutions (Haokip 305). Non-tribal migrants were incentivised to conduct business in Meghalaya, resulting in their swift ascendance to dominance in the commercial, governmental, and financial sectors. During the colonial period, the relationship between the migrant and the indigenous communities was marked by shared experiences and cultural spaces facilitated by a common opposition to British colonialism. Such narratives suggest a mutual desire for and cooperative interaction between the migrant and indigenous communities, despite the demographic and economic disparities between them (Dev 83-85).

The post-independence period saw a second phase of migration, particularly from neighbouring country Bangladesh, which led to a sense of insecurity among the local populace in Meghalaya. Following the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, Bengalis from Sylhet were legally settled by the then Meghalaya government in various areas of Shillong, designated as revenue plots (Mukhim 7). However, despite the influx of non-locals, the Khasi-Jaintias and non-tribals in Jaintia Hills and the

interior parts of Khasi Hills have co-existed peacefully. This harmonious relationship can be attributed to the relatively small number of non-locals and the local control of the economy in terms of trade and commerce. Even intermarriage between Nepalis, Biharis, and native locals has occurred, and some migrant Bangladeshis have permanently settled without any resistance from the locals (Haokip 306).

The state capital of Shillong has been the epicentre of tensions between the tribal and non-tribal communities in Meghalaya. Just eight years after the creation of the state in 1972, violent riots broke out between non-tribals and the dominant tribal groups, culminating in a major conflict during a Hindu religious celebration on October 22, 1979 (Baruah 2-3). This event prompted the displacement of significant sections of the Bengali community to safer locations, diminishing their presence and influence in the state. Subsequent riots occurred in 1987 and 1992, the former resulting from the expulsion of Nepali coal mine workers from Meghalaya and the latter due to a demand for the closure of non-tribal establishments and suspension of trade licenses in wholesale trading (Dhar 80-81). These ethnic schisms and cleavages between tribals and non-tribals were initially purported to stem from the influx of foreigners and the fear of demographic swamping by migrants. However, census reports indicate that this notion is a myth as the non-tribal population has steadily declined from 19.5% in 1971 to 13.9% in 2011, discrediting any claims of demographic threat (Haokip 306).

The post-1993 era in Meghalaya witnessed a generally harmonious coexistence between the tribal and non-tribal communities. Nonetheless, periodic estrangements have emerged among the tribal communities, stemming from minor incidents or policies upheld by the state government to protect their economic interests, identity, and land. The ‘Ksan rngiew’ movement, launched by the ‘Khasi Students Union’ (KSU) in 2000, aimed to invigorate and inspire the Khasi people towards a brighter future (Malngiang 180-1). Its main demands included the immediate implementation of the ‘Inner Line Regulation System’, work permits, and acceptance of the 1951 cut-off year to remove the names of foreigners, the creation of thousands of jobs for the unemployed, and the reservation of employment opportunities in a 60:40 ratio for the Khasi-Jaintias and Garos, respectively. It also

sought to amend the ‘Land Transfer Act’ to prevent tribals from other states from acquiring land in Meghalaya and to abolish the power of attorney to acquire land (Haokip 307).

The latter part of 2013 saw a series of protests in the form of ‘public bandh’ by various civil society and student groups, including the KSU, ‘Federation of Khasi Jaintia and Garo People’ (FKJGP), and ‘Garo Students’ Union’ (GSU), in Meghalaya. These protests were against the non-implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system, despite the Lanong Committee’s recommendation to implement it to control the influx. However, the then Chief Minister of the state, Mukul Sangma, rejected the implementation of ILP and called for a more effective legislation to address the issue of illegal influx while ensuring the easy entry of legal citizens into the state. The pro-ILP activists insisted on implementing the ILP system at any cost. In contrast, others deemed the demand as 'the half-baked idea’ of some Khasi chauvinists and questioned the state’s preparedness for potential crises in the education and tourism sectors. Furthermore, according to Haokip, some settler communities feared an “anti-non-tribal overtone” in the “ILP rhetoric” and were apprehensive of another 1979 riot (308).

The question of violence that has endured throughout the course of human history, and its intricate relationship with ethnic identity, is a complex and nuanced issue that requires a critical examination. The multi-faceted nature of violence takes on various forms, from physical to psychological to structural. Physical violence, as a forceful manifestation of harm, has the power to inflict injury, disfigurement, or even death upon individuals or groups. In contrast, psychological violence operates through non-physical means, as an “indirect threat of mental violence” (Galtung 170) and is expressed through intimidation, emotional abuse, and coercion. Structural violence, however, emerges from the very social and economic structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. This type of violence, according to Galtung, “is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (171).

The interplay between violence and ethnic identity is a dynamic and fluid process, where ethnic identity can serve as a catalyst for violence, and violence, in turn, can shape ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is a complex and multifaceted concept that reflects an individual's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group based on shared cultural, linguistic, or ancestral traits. The manifestation of violent behaviours can be significantly influenced by ethnic identity, especially when there is competition for scarce resources such as land, water, or political power. Moreover, ethnic identity can be invoked as a justification for violence, particularly when the group perceives its identity to be under threat from other groups. Furthermore, violence can serve as a means of asserting ethnic dominance or superiority over other groups. Also, "when the state or society poses ascriptive barriers to upward mobility for minority groups, they may develop separatist nationalist movements" (Fearon and Laitin 78). Ethnic identity can be used as a tool to legitimise violence and maintain power imbalances between groups. Ethnic identity can be constructed based on shared cultural traits and values and used to differentiate one group from another. When ethnic identity is used in a way that reinforces power imbalances and justifies violence, it becomes a form of cultural violence.

Several theoretical perspectives exist that attempt to explain the complex and intricate relationship between violence and ethnic identity. The 'instrumental' theory, for instance, suggests that ethnic identity is a strategic tool utilised by political elites to mobilise support and gain power. Violence is often used in the pursuit of ethnic group interests or to challenge the dominance of other ethnic groups. Conversely, the 'primordialist' theory posits that ethnic identity is innate, rooted in biology or history, and is unchangeable. This theory suggests that violence emerges from competing ethnic groups who seek to claim resources or territory based on their primordial identity. In this vein, Horowitz writes:

> [Ethnic] groups are defined by ascriptive differences, whether the indicium or group identity is color, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of origin or some combination thereof. (17-18)

Violence can also shape ethnic identity, particularly in cases of mass violence, genocide, or ethnic cleansing. These extreme forms of violence can destroy entire communities, erasing their cultural heritage and identity. In some cases, survivors of violence, according to Staub, may develop a stronger sense of ethnic identity as a way of coping with trauma and loss. However, violence can also lead to the fragmentation of ethnic identity, as people may dissociate themselves from their ethnic group to avoid persecution or discrimination (430).

The literature that emanates from the northeastern region of India is frequently characterised as the literature of conflict, predominantly attributed to the protracted engagement of the region with ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, and other such issues for several decades. These challenges continue to persist in some areas and are evidently reflected on almost every page of the literary works from this region. Stories that have emerged out of this region are dotted with the portrayal of the people's condition, including their experiences, social traditions, and sociopolitical activities that are still prevalent in these tiny states in northeastern India. Stories and tales from this region function, as most fictional and non-fictional works do, by providing a vivid depiction of the existing social, economic, political, and cultural life of the indigenous people. In this instance, they accomplish this through serving as a tool to depict the history of the Khasi tribe. Similarly, Janice Pariat's stories effectively capture the social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the Khasi community, depicting their cultural experiences in the aftermath of the ethnic conflicts in the state of Meghalaya between the indigenous population and the non-tribal groups in the late twentieth century. Notably, her short stories "19/87" and "Laitlum," included in the collection *Boats on Land*, aptly illustrate the contrasting ideologies prevalent during the tumultuous periods of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Shillong. These ideologies centred on the choice between embracing ethnic nationalist propaganda and seeking peaceful resolutions to the conflict.

The New Historicists frequently assert that while history has a claim to textuality since we do not have access to the lived, actual past but only have remnants of it preserved, fictional literature or text has historicity because it is

embedded in the social and cultural context. The New Historicist approach sees literature as a depiction of historical forces rather than as a work of fiction deserving of investigation. This contemporary school of literary criticism takes into account the text's social, cultural, historical, economic, and political ramifications. New Historicism, according to Stephen Greenblatt, is "a shift away from a criticism centered on 'verbal icons' toward a criticism centered on cultural artefacts" (3). Furthermore, he asserts that historical and literary writings can benefit one another, and he suggests a parallel reading of both literary and non-literary texts from the same historical era.

The northeast region of India has experienced ongoing conflict, which is also reflected in its literature. The literature of northeastern India has been described as "literature that is too conflict ridden," "literature that depicts violence and rage," "violence as a thematic interest," and so on (Longkumer 2). However, a closer study reveals that all of these writings have attempted to maintain peace at some point. Pariat's collection of short stories, *Boats on Land*, is one such work that depicts the sociocultural and economic reality of the Khasis during and after the colonial era. The stories "19/87" and "Laitlum," which were both set in the post-independent Shillong, capture the political unrests that happened between the Khasis and the non-Khasis, also called the *dkhars* or outsiders.

As the title suggests, the story "19/87" is set in a period when Meghalaya has witnessed a recrudescence of violent riots and ethnic strife instigated by various insurgent groups such as the 'Khasi Students Union' (KSU), the 'Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council' (HNLC) and others. The story follows the life of a young Khasi man named Banri, who befriends a Muslim tailor named Suleiman. Suleiman is a *dkhar*, a Khasi term for persons who are considered as 'outsiders' to the Khasi tribe, 'foreigners' to the tribal hills, despite the fact that they are both citizens of India. The story amplifies non-normative and alternative perspectives regarding notions of belonging and indigeneity in relation to a particular locale while also shedding light on the expressions of dissonance with the concept of cultural purity.

The dichotomy between tribal and non-tribal groups in Meghalaya has been heavily politicised and results in the portrayal of the latter as outsiders who encroach upon the economic and socio-political rights of the indigenous people, leading to recurring conflicts over the past four or five decades. The formation of new ethnolinguistic states has not fully resolved these tensions, as "non-ethnic polities" and "trans-ethnic clans" continue to exist within these geopolitical zones (Ramirez 94-6). As Horowitz has stated that "ethnicity is often accompanied by hostility toward outgroups" (7), these non-tribal groups are frequently perceived as infiltrators or outsiders, fueling the persistent conflicts that have characterised the region over the past few decades. Zygmunt Bauman's conceptualisation of the stranger is relevant here, which emphasises the profound threat that this stranger figure poses, a threat that surpasses that of an enemy. This is because while there may still be some possibility for 'sociation' or association with an enemy, the social positioning of the stranger makes such a relationship nearly impossible. Indeed, the presence of the stranger is viewed as a direct threat to the very possibility of sociation, as their unfamiliarity and perceived otherness challenge the very foundations of social order and stability. Bauman writes:

> There is hardly an anomaly more anomalous than the stranger. He stands between friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside. He stands for the treacherousness of a friend, for the cunning disguise of the enemies, for the fallibility of order, the vulnerability of the inside. (61)

Pariat, in her story "19/87," employs this ambiguous situation, symbolised by the slash in the title, to delve into the potential for sociation with the stranger. The aim of this exploration is to interrogate the common assumption that when a stranger crosses the threshold from the outside to the inside, they must necessarily be viewed with suspicion or hostility. Pariat seeks to challenge this notion and encourage a more inclusive approach that recognises the value of engaging with the stranger rather than marginalising or excluding them. According to Mara Matta, this intimate glimpse at the life of the *dkhar* [Suleiman] is the author's intention of disproving "a necessary repositioning of the stranger in the sphere of the enemy" and exploring "a

possibility of sociation with the outsider as a friend" (52). In this way, the story thus tries to "deconstruct the artificial idea of a pure *khasiness*" (53).

Pariat's narrative of Suleiman, a Muslim tailor, draws inspiration from actual events that she encountered in local news headlines. In an interview with *Asiablog*, Pariat recalls how the character of Suleiman comes to life:

> In "19/87," the central character was inspired by a newspaper report of a Muslim tailor who was caught in a crossfire between the police and local militants in my hometown, Shillong. Yet nothing is ever exact or solemnly faithful. There is a point from which the imagination takes over. ("Interview: Debut Indian Author")

In 1987, Meghalaya witnessed a resurgence of the violent uprisings that had previously ravaged the region in 1979. The attacks, which targeted the *dkhar* community, were marked by incidents of arson and physical violence. The demonstrations were primarily led by certain Khasi student groups and political figures and culminated in the destruction of an entire neighbourhood. Situated within a particularly turbulent era of Meghalayan history, the narrative can be interpreted as a significant experiment in social history or as a work that challenges conventional assumptions about tribal history.

In the text, as the story progresses, we learn that Shillong, the setting of the story, has been covered by an unrest situation instigated by the insurgent groups, and "weeks of curfew [have] forced everyone to stay home" (Pariat, "19/87" 98). Being "frustrated with having 'outsiders' running the state and controlling banks and businesses," the locals have "organized themselves into various insurgent groups. . . and waged a civil war against the government and the ethnicities they saw as most threatening" (98). Suleiman, being a *dkhar*, is also well aware of the situation. He is also aware that his friend and neighbour Usman, a young boy, and his family had already left the town for their own safety:

> He'd [Usman] hopped over the wall to say goodbye, and explained, 'My father says it's getting too dangerous to live in Shillong.' (98)

Suleiman can also observe that the cluster of Muslim families living in their locality has rapidly grown smaller because of the threat they have continuously received. Suleiman, being a permanent settler for almost two or three decades, has nowhere else to go.

As the story develops, we learn that Suleiman and Banri have slowly developed an unpredicted friendship between them. However, as the story unfolds, we are confronted with the complexity of these two characters' lives and friendships during the terrible times of the 1987 riots. The social positioning of Suleiman, a Muslim outsider and tailor, and Banri, a Khasi tribal worker, differ significantly. However, their friendship unveils the fallacy of essentialist identitarian markers and the perils of racial profiling. This narrative underlines the fundamental role of relationality in the construction of identities and elucidates the complex interplay between individual agency and social structures in shaping inter-group dynamics. By challenging reductive and homogenising categorisations, this account underscores the need for nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to identity formation and community building, which acknowledge the multiplicity and fluidity of human experiences.

Suleiman's persistent pursuit of positioning himself within the realm of insiders, despite the rigid boundaries imposed by codified ethnic and religious lines, is representative of his ardent pursuit of cultural adaptation and social acceptance. This attempt necessitates a high degree of proficiency in cultural practices and a deft manipulation of established norms. Suleiman consistently redefines the parameters of his existence, negotiating boundaries and regulations to assert his control over the rules of engagement. His passion for kite flying serves as a vivid manifestation of his pursuit of mastery, which allows him to escape the boundaries of his community while also seeking acceptance within it.

Suleiman's adoption of the role of the 'outsider/within', a term coined by Patricia Collins to conceptualise the social positioning of the Black women, reveals a nuanced and complex identity that emerges from navigating the periphery of dominant societal norms while also participating in their conventions. According to

Collins, this "'outsider within' status has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society. . ." (14). Homi Bhabha's conceptualisation of the 'outsider/within' highlights the ambiguous position of individuals on the margins of mainstream society, reflecting the struggles of Suleiman to reconcile his marginalised status with his aspirations for inclusion and recognition. His endeavour to navigate a space fraught with the potential for violence requires a delicate balance between acceptance and detachment, necessitating the adoption of the form of the 'outsider/within' as a means of self-preservation.

Suleiman's pursuit of kite flying as a form of cultural capital exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the role of cultural practices in shaping an individual's social standing. His pursuit of mastery in this cultural practice serves as a vehicle for accruing cultural capital, which can confer social advantages and facilitate access to networks and resources that are otherwise inaccessible to marginalised individuals. His acquisition of cultural capital through kite flying underscores the significance of cultural capital as a tool for social mobility in stratified societies:

> 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, "19/87" 97)

Suleiman's efforts to circumnavigate the complexities of his social environment and negotiate ethnic and religious boundaries underline his adaptability and resilience. His identification with the 'outsider/within' and his pursuit of cultural capital reveal the complexities of identity construction in stratified societies, underscoring the role of cultural practices in shaping an individual's social positioning. His pursuit of mastery in kite flying reflects his aspirations for social integration and mobility, representing a profound exploration of the interplay between cultural practices, social identity, and power dynamics in society.

Constrained to the subordinate status of a subaltern with no "agency or voice," Suleiman is compelled to navigate obscure paths in order to survive while also taking care to avoid "contact with the Khasis," who demand a rigid separation of

social lives (Matta 56). The norms of behaviour policed by the insiders serve as a means of regulating social interaction. Violations of these norms or failures to conform to outsider identity performance expectations can result in grave consequences, as illustrated by Pariat's brief description of Suleiman's attraction to Christine, a Khasi neighbour girl who occasionally engaged in flirtation with him:

> 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, "19/87" 101)

The excerpt adeptly captures the pervasive dread experienced by Suleiman, a member of a non-tribal community residing in Meghalaya's capital city, as he faces an unrelenting state of insecurity wrought by recurrent riots. Suleiman's anxious inner monologue, "how much longer could. . ." (111), serves as a poignant testament to the persistent and disquieting sense of insecurity that grips non-tribal residents. The apprehension surrounding the transgression of societal norms or the adoption of an outsider identity finds expression in the writings of Paramjit Bakhshi, particularly in his essay titled "I, Dkhar." Within this essay, Bakhshi recounts his personal encounters as a *dkhar*, or outsider, in Shillong, and elucidates the prevailing hesitancy to vocalise one's thoughts or commit them to writing, driven by a collective apprehension of exacerbating the situation at hand:

> For fear of making things worse, we have hesitated in opening our mouths or putting pen to paper. We have spoken to each other in hushed whispers and dissuaded the other from speaking out aloud. (135)

Bakhshi further articulates his anguish regarding the reduction of his identity as a *dkhar* to essentialist terms, highlighting the futility of his efforts to navigate the complex boundaries of ethnicity and religion, which are rather met with suspicion and accusations of contamination. In parallel with Suleiman's experiences, Bakhshi's mere presence serves as a poignant reminder of the fragile nature of the dominant group's identity, subjecting him to continuous scrutiny and marginalisation. He

laments that despite engaging in social integration and adopting local customs, his distinctive physical features forever mark him as an outsider, rendering any efforts to assimilate futile:

> My features brand me an outsider, and no amount of intermingling will make me an acceptable local. Even if I were to attend church, wear a *tapmohkhlieh* (a traditional Khasi shawl) and che *Kwai* (local betel nut) habitually. Some stranger would just have to say, '*wat krendkhar'* (keep quiet, outsider), and I would have no acceptable retort. (144)

Nevertheless, Sanjoy Hazarika contends that the experience of marginalisation and exclusion is not confined solely to the *dkhars* in Meghalaya. Similar instances have been witnessed among individuals branded as 'outsiders' in various other states within the northeastern region. Hazarika observes that these individuals, whether they are travellers or settlers, encounter discrimination and prejudice, giving rise to unsettling narratives. Each state within the region assigns specific terms to denote the outsider:

> There are horror stories, too, among those who come from the 'mainland', as travellers and settlers have found, and who face discrimination and prejudice in the North-East. There are specific names for the outsider in virtually each state–*bahirormanuh* (outside people) or *bidekhi* or *deshwali* in Assam, *vai* in Mizoram, *dkhar* in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, and anti-outsider campaigns across the region have been sharp, ugly and many times bloody. (173)

In the context of northeast India, minority groups that are not perceived to pose an actual threat to the dominant majority are often seen as a hindrance to the promotion of sub-national ethnos and cultural purity. These 'minority others' are perceived as an extra presence who do not fit into the cultural imagination of a homogeneous group that upholds a particular set of majoritarian ideas and cultural values. This growing hostility towards minority others is expressed through a "narcissistic process" in nationalism, as described by Arjun Appadurai, whereby

majorities are “mobilized to think [that] they are in danger of becoming minor” and, conversely, to fear that minorities could become the dominant force. Appadurai suggests that this process leads to the formation of an ethnos in a modern nation, which provides the basis for the emergence of predatory identities. These identities claim that they require the extinction of another collectivity for their own survival:

> The formation of an ethnos in a modern nation often provides the basis for the emergence of predatory identities, identities that claim to require the extinction of another collectivity for their own survival. (51)

To speak of Appadurai’s ‘fear of small numbers’ is to inscribe oneself within a discourse of exclusion, one that seeks to preserve the cultural purity and exclusivity of a dominant majority. This fear, as identified by Appadurai, is founded upon the premise that the mere existence of a minority other poses a threat to the very identity of the majority. In the story at hand, “19/87”, we see this fear manifest in the treatment of Suleiman, whose efforts to negotiate ethnic and religious boundaries are met with suspicion and accusations of pollution. Indeed, Suleiman’s very presence serves as a reminder of the fragility of the dominant group’s identity, and as such, he is subjected to constant scrutiny and marginalisation. Such is the nature of the discourse of exclusion, in which the other is always a potential threat to the self.

In the midst of current sociopolitical circumstances, there is an emergence of predatory identities that extol the virtues of majoritarianism while romanticising the notion of ethnic singularity. Such phenomena occur when the concept of national peoplehood is reduced to an ideal of ethnic homogeneity that vehemently rejects the mere presence of even the smallest minority groups within national borders: “Predatory identities, in other words, are products of situations in which the idea of a national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole” (Appadurai 53).

This inclination towards a singular ethnic identity is not merely an ideological posture. It is a performative act that enforces the imposition of a singular, dominant

culture, thereby suppressing and erasing the plurality of voices and identities that exist within a given society.

The process of colonialism, the partition of India in 1947, and the subsequent urbanisation and increased human mobility have engendered a space of enunciation that is as diverse as it is complex. In the state of Meghalaya, particularly in the capital city of Shillong, this space is marked by the presence of migrant settlers from a plurality of cultural, ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. These settlers, constituting a minority, are heterogeneously situated within the social fabric of the city and can be broadly categorised into two groups: non-tribals, such as Bengalis, Nepalis, Punjabis, Marwaris, Assamese and others, locally known as *dkhar*, and non-native tribal communities, such as the Nagas, Mizos, Hmars, Manipuris, and others. The inter-group relations within this multi-cultural society of Shillong are marked by the emergence of an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, which underscores the asymmetrical power dynamic that informs the discursive field of the city. However, indigenous tribals in the state have increasingly sought to resist the hegemonic tendencies of this discourse by promoting a 'sons of the soil' policy, which is directed at excluding and marginalising non-tribal settlers. This policy is predicated upon the notion of belongingness, which is predicated upon a myth of originary purity.

The demographic data from the 2011 census reveals a decrease in the share of non-tribals in the state's population, which can be attributed to out-migration. However, this data belies a perceived notion of increased in-migration that is perpetuated by indigenous tribal members belonging to pressure groups and political parties. This perception is shaped by the anxieties of insider-outsider dynamics that are concomitant with the politics of belonging and exclusion in a multicultural society. These anxieties are reflective of the ambivalent positionality of the migrant settlers within the social and cultural space of Shillong, which is marked by the tension between the desire for assimilation and the imperative of difference.

In the short story "Laitlum" from Pariat's collection *Boats on Land*, we also witness the struggle of the Khasi people to maintain their cultural identity and land,

which consequently resulted in inter-group strife and tribal-non-tribal conflicts that wracked Shillong in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The story's title itself invokes the Khasi people's ardent yearning to safeguard their ethnicity and their land. Laitlum, located at a distance of 24 kilometres from Shillong atop the East Khasi Hills, represents the home of the Khasi people, which has indelibly shaped their culture, their identity, and their history. These elements are so inextricably intertwined that one cannot conceive of them apart from one another. The advent of outsiders into this region of Meghalaya encountered only passive resistance during the British administration, and these times were referred to as the 'old days'. However, in the present day, the Khasi people staunchly oppose the presence of outsiders on their land, perceiving such intrusion as a violation of their territorial integrity. The exact cause of the unrest that rocked Shillong in the late 1980s remains unmentioned by Pariat, but it gradually surfaces as the story unfolds.

The story "Laitlum" unfolds in the scenic state of Meghalaya, specifically in the bustling city of Shillong. In contrast to the typical conflicts that arise between rebels and government forces, the crux of this story revolves around the clash between the 'outsiders' and 'insiders', namely the Khasis and the *dkhars*. This is why a character (a non-Khasi) in the story Anku, who is developing an intimate friendship with the narrator, has the fear of leaving 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, "Laitlum" 132)

Anku's friendship with his closest companion, the narrator, is closely intertwined with his love for Shillong, his birthplace. The prospect of leaving Shillong causes him considerable distress, as he feels a deep sense of attachment to the place. However, the idea of departing from Shillong has been inculcated by the older generation into the new generation, and Anku's father, too, struggles with this decision before eventually leaving. While the earlier generation saw Shillong as a

land of opportunity, the succeeding generation regards it as their homeland. This establishes an intense and unshakeable connection between the land and its people, as demonstrated by the emotional attachment of Anku's father and also Chris and Melvin's family to Shillong. Their profound attachment to Khasi tradition is also evident in their observance of traditional Khasi funeral rites when their grandmother passed away:

> 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, "Laitlum" 140)

Set against the backdrop of the early 1990s, a time rife with political violence and curfews, the story follows the life of an unnamed young girl who narrates the story and her friendship with her neighbour, a spirited Assamese boy named Anku. The story also delves into the love affair between the narrator's rebellious and pampered sister, Grace, and a Chinese boy named Chris. All these characters share a common desire for freedom from their restrictive environment. Thus, they embark on a journey to Laitlum, a secluded hilltop located an hour away from the chaos of Shillong. For them, Laitlum represents a haven of peace and tranquillity away from the chaos and unrest of Shillong:

> 'Why is this place called Laitlum?' asked Melvin suddenly.
>
> 'It means where the hills are set free,' answered Grace. . .
>
> On the other side of the valley, the sun had shredded the sky and fallen behind the mountains. We watched the clouds bleed.
>
> 'When you're sitting here,' said Chris finally, 'all the shit in life seems far away.' (Pariat, "Laitlum" 138-9)

To these characters, Laitlum symbolises a fervent aspiration for freedom and serenity, furnishing an avenue of escape from the tumultuous and agitated atmosphere, along with the pervasive grip of prejudices and animosity that engulfed the city where they live.

However, their idyllic retreat is short-lived as tragedy strikes when both Chris and Melvin drown in a river a few months later. At the end of the story, we learn that Anku and his family leave Shillong to avoid the conflict and relocate to Dibrugarh, Assam. Similarly, Chris and Melvin's parents also leave Shillong due to the escalating extortion demands from militant groups in the state. In her poignant depictions of Anku's family, Chris and Melvin's family, and Suleiman, Pariat exposes a deep-seated sense of statelessness that extends beyond mere physical displacement. Statelessness, as Pariat illustrates, is not limited to migrants but is a condition that can afflict individuals or groups who have been rooted in a particular geography for generations yet are still excluded from the cultural and political frameworks that govern it. Discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, race, and religion are some of the primary culprits that result in statelessness, often leading to the exclusion of indigenous peoples from their own lands.

In contrast to traditional narratives of statelessness, which focus on the economic and political motivations that drive exclusionary practices, Pariat employs a more nuanced approach. Her protagonists' yearning for belonging and their sense of displacement not only captures the existential plight of the entire *dkhar* community but also serves as a powerful indictment of the social and cultural forces that underpin the condition of statelessness. The stateless individual, as Paul Weis poignantly describes, "has been called flotsam, a res nullius, and has been compared to a vessel on the open sea, not sailing under any flag" (1074). Stateless persons are denied the basic protections that are afforded to citizens by a state, rendering them vulnerable to all forms of discriminatory practices. Pariat's characters embody this condition of statelessness, where they are left to drift aimlessly amidst a sea of hate and exclusion, with no hope of finding a safe harbour.

In the context of Meghalaya, the phenomenon of non-tribal individuals, colloquially referred to as *dkhar*, has remained a persistent source of tension and contestation. Despite their prolonged residence, these individuals are continually cast as outsiders, unable to establish a sense of belonging within the tribal community. The tribal population's identity is deeply rooted in the land, which endows them with an innate sense of attachment and belonging. However, for the first generation of

immigrants, the land represents “a land of opportunity”, a place for material and economic gain, rather than an emotional connection (Biswas and Das 74). As such, their relationship to the land is fundamentally different from that of the subsequent generation.

The non-tribal community, uprooted 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. In this context, the politics of nationalism, propagated by the tribal community, remain a source of estrangement for the *dkhar* community, as they are unable to assert a shared affinity with the land. Despite these differing socio-political realities, both communities share an emotional attachment to the land, albeit with subtle nuances (Biswas and 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 identity, as exemplified in Pariat’s fictional characters like Suleiman in “19/87”. The acceptance and rejection, love and hatred, friendship and animosity they encounter from the tribal community further compound this struggle. The presence of this situation is discernible in the routine existence of Suleiman, who encounters the persistent expressions of antipathy and hostility from the locals on a daily basis:

> . . . leaving his house only if he had to, stocking up on food for weeks at a stretch. 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, “19/87” 101)

This has engendered within Suleiman a feeling of disconnection and isolation from the territory that he previously identified as his own, prompting a deep sense of unbelongingness. The title “19/87” also serves as a symbolic marker of the disjuncture between past and present, gesturing towards the themes of displacement and alienation that pervade the story. The protagonist, Suleiman, a Muslim *dkhar*, finds himself uprooted from his cultural and geographical moorings. The numerical values “19” and “87” in the title indicate the vast chasm that separates Suleiman’s

current situation from his memories of the past. However, the past is not a mere external realm; rather, it is inextricably linked to Suleiman's identity, as he considers the land of Shillong to be constitutive of his very being. Yet, his sense of belonging is eroded by the pernicious effects of cultural stereotypes and animosity, engendering feelings of alienation and frustration. Such an experience is emblematic of the broader condition of the marginalised subject, who must navigate the complexities of identity and belonging in the face of exclusion and discrimination. This frustration and anger is seen in one of his internal monologues:

> 'I've been in Shillong for a long time. I'm thirty-four years old and I came here before some of you were even born.' (Pariat, "19'87" 100)

In examining the notion of self among the Khasi tribal community, it becomes apparent that their understanding of identity serves a crucial role in the maintenance of their differentiation from non-indigenous communities. The boundaries that are policed between these groups are emblematic of a power dynamic that enables the Khasi people to assert their dominance over minority non-indigenous groups. This dynamic is further perpetuated through the use of cultural stereotypes, which are often rooted in ethnocentric biases. Lehtonen suggests that these cultural stereotypes associated with comparing different groups in intercultural settings are commonly indicative of ethnocentrism:

> One general characteristics of stereotyping is the difference claimed with respect to the qualities associated with the members of in-group and out-group. Usually, out-groups are seen as more homogenous than one's own group and they are perceived as possessing less desirable traits than the in-group. 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 of which we feel are universally valid. (62)

Indeed, the ways in which inter-group comparisons are made within intercultural contexts reveal the cultural stereotypes that are employed to reinforce these asymmetrical relations. In the context of the Khasis of Meghalaya, the effects of such stereotypes are felt not only in their social interactions but also in the broader scope of their relationships. It is within this context of cultural difference and power dynamics that the Khasi community's self-ascription and membership in a group must be understood. For the Khasis, identity along ethnic lines serves as a marker that reinforces their differentiation from non-indigenous counterparts. Yet, this differentiation is not merely a matter of social distinction but rather a reflection of the power dynamics that shape intercultural relations.

The characters of Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin have long regarded Shillong as their 'home' and 'belonging'. However, in the face of inter-group conflict and cultural stereotyping, which have resulted in violent outbursts, these characters are deprived of the fundamental prerequisites for the formation of a sense of belonging. As a result, they are driven by an innate desire to find a means of feeling that they belong or are part of a larger whole, be it a state, territory, a culture, or a group. Chris's attraction to Laitlum and his family's performance of traditional Khasi funeral rituals is one such instance of this quest for belongingness. The pursuit of friendship by Suleiman, as well as the yearning for Laitlum by Chris and Melvin, can be read as an allegory for the search for home in a world that has been marked by dislocation and detachment. The very conditions that have engendered this pursuit are rooted in the sensation of 'unhomeliness,' a term that Homi K. Bhabha draws from Freud's 'Unheimlich' or 'Uncanny' in English translation. As Bhabha explains, the "unhomely" is not necessarily a state of lacking a home or homelessness. Rather, it is a state of being in which the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the intimate and the alien, have become blurred. It is a state in which the very notion of home has been destabilised and thrown into question, leading characters like Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin to engage in a perpetual search for something that can provide them with a sense of belonging.

The pursuit of friendship, then, becomes an attempt to create a sense of home through the establishment of intimate and meaningful connections with others. Similarly, the yearning for Laitlum is an attempt to reclaim a connection to a specific place, to create a sense of rootedness that can counteract the sensation of unbelonging 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)

In the face of inter-ethnic strife and racial stereotyping, the sensation of the unhomely emerges as a disorienting experience, wherein individuals begin to sense that their home is no longer truly their own. The once-comforting and secure haven of the home is stripped away, replaced instead by feelings of alienation, separation and frustration. The sense of self becomes fragmented as the familiar and the real lose their grounding, leaving behind a dual perspective that reshapes one's very being. This condition of the unhomely, then, signifies a radical reorientation of one's relationship to place and belonging.

In the allegorical pursuit of a home, we find the pursuit of an ideological construct, one that is emblematic of a stable identity characterised by a sense of security, comfort, and familiarity. Yet, as Bhabha argues, the home and the past are inherently unstable, particularly in nations and cultures under oppression, where the notion of home represents a utopian and optimistic version of a past that existed before the onset of oppression.

In the postcolonial space between the homely and the unhomely, the construction of identity is marked by a mixing of the familiar and the unfamiliar as individuals seek to navigate a terrain that is fraught with uncertainty and disorientation. Drawing inspiration from Freud's concept of the Uncanny, Bhabha suggests that the breach between the subconscious and the conscious leads to an uncanny moment, wherein the familiar becomes strange and unsettling. When the world intrudes upon the home, it disrupts the stability of the identity that was once

perceived to be unchanging and secure. In this way, the rise of inter-ethnic conflict and the escalating incidence of violent attacks directed against the non-tribal population have rendered the homely space unhomely, shaking the sense of security and comfort that it once provided.

The theoretical construct of ‘othering’ entails the establishment of social demarcations predicated upon variegations in cultural, ethnic, or other epistemological substrates. This ontological process has the potential to engender sentiments of marginalisation and alienation amongst those deemed disparate or exotic. The penchant for observing individuals outside the ethnic confines as ‘exotic entities’ has become entrenched within the societal fabric. This state of exoticism pertains to the allure and fascination that individuals harbour towards cultures or persons that deviate from their own. While this phenomenon can be propitious, it can also lead to objectification and stereotyping of individuals or groups, resulting in feelings of otherness and exclusion. Frequently, exoticism entails a selective fixation on particular aspects of a culture while neglecting or depreciating other elements, resulting in a sense of ‘exotic otherness’ whereby individuals or groups are viewed as anomalous or aberrant.

The advent of intercultural interactions between individuals or groups of different cultural orientations may create an environment of discomfort or uncertainty, leading to the fortification of boundaries and the ascription of the different groups as ‘other’. These disparities may emanate from a plethora of factors, ranging from ethnicity, language, and religion, to cultural practices, with these distinctions sometimes being exaggerated or stereotyped, culminating in further feelings of unbelonging and exclusion. Exoticism is the modality of apperception whereby individuals or groups are perceived as strange, unfamiliar, and dissimilar due to their perceived cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. It is commonly linked to the perception of the exotic as a source of captivation and curiosity but also as a threat to the established social order. Exoticism has pervaded Western culture since the colonial era, where the Orient, Africa, and the Americas were often depicted as exotic and inferior. The representation of exotic cultures has also been employed as a

marketing tool in the tourism industry, where exotic locations are often advertised as a means of escape from the ordinary and customary. The trope of 'othering' individuals or groups beyond the confines of ethnic identification as objects of exoticism and unfamiliarity is perceptibly manifested in the short story "Sky Graves." In this story, the character of Kasa, a *dkhar*, is relegated to the position of an exotic subject owing to his peculiar language and customs, a feature that typifies the discursive mechanisms of otherness and the processes of exoticisation:

> Esther, Bah Hem's wife, made up a bed for their visitor, downstairs in a cot in the living room, surprisingly without question. Usually, like most locals in Shillong, she was wary of outsiders and, what they considered, their strange language and habits. Their other children, a son and two daughters, treated Kasa as a curiosity, something their father had picked up from one of the locality melas he was so fond of attending.
>
> 'Patlun lyngkot,' giggled one of them, pointing at Kasa's shorts. (Pariat, "Sky Graves" 152)

This passage delves into the phenomenon of othering, which denotes the cognitive process of categorising individuals or groups as fundamentally different and inferior on account of their cultural, ethnic, or racial dissimilarities. Bah Hem's children's reaction to the Assamese visitor epitomises the idea of exoticism, whereby the foreign or the unfamiliar is perceived as strange, unfamiliar, and different, thereby becoming a subject of fascination, curiosity, but also fear and suspicion, as they are deemed to pose a threat to the prevailing social order.

Furthermore, the passage elucidates the role of cultural norms and values in fashioning attitudes towards outsiders. The mother, Esther, displays initial wariness towards the visitor, as is customary of many locals in Shillong, a stance that can be attributed to the sway of cultural norms and practices that underscore the significance of upholding social boundaries and safeguarding cultural identity. Nonetheless, Esther's eventual decision to embrace the visitor highlights the potential for individual agency and discretion in negotiating these cultural norms and values:

> ‘Patlun lyngkot,’ giggled one of them, pointing at Kasa’s shorts.
>
> Esther told them sharply to behave themselves, especially at the dining table, and spooned out more stew on their visitor’s plate. (Pariat, “Sky Graves” 152)

In Pariat’s fictional narratives, we find a multifaceted exploration of the complexities of ethnic conflict and violence. The author deftly navigates between the perspectives of tribal and non-tribal individuals, providing a nuanced portrayal of the lived experiences of those caught in the midst of these tumultuous events. Through her narratives, we encounter a diverse cast of characters, each hailing from a unique background and grappling with the far-reaching consequences of ethnic tensions. Indeed, the impact of such conflicts is felt not only by non-tribals but by the Khasi community as well. In the city of Shillong, a pervasive sense of fear and distress has enveloped the populace, leaving many struggling to make sense of their changing world. Some Khasi youth have turned to insurgent groups, while others have fallen prey to substance addiction. Meanwhile, the presence of government counter-insurgency forces has only served to compound the already profound challenges faced by the common people.

The multicultural nature of Shillong, which has long been a source of pride and identity for its residents, has also become a site of tension and unrest. The failure of the state government to address the mass unemployment plaguing the Khasi community has only intensified the collective angst of its members. In this fraught context, political leaders have sought to mobilise the Khasi youth through appeals to ethnic purity and nationalism, further exacerbating the already volatile situation.

Pariat’s stories yield a poignant example of the profound impact of ethnic conflict on the lives of individuals in Shillong. For instance, the short story “Embassy” serves as a striking illustration of this phenomenon, centring around the character of Mama Lang, whose experiences exemplify the disorienting and destabilising effects of involvement in the Khasi Students Union. Through the lens of Lang’s narrative, we are confronted with the far-reaching consequences of ethnic

tensions in Shillong and the ways in which they have upended the lives of countless individuals. Indeed, Lang's trajectory speaks to the broader themes that emerge from Pariat's work: the sense of fear and helplessness that permeates everyday life, the various forms of unrest and disaffection that have come to define the city's social fabric, and the profound challenges posed by political leaders who seek to mobilise youth through appeals to nationalism and ethnic purity. Through her masterful handling of narrative perspective, Pariat provides a crucial space for reflection and contemplation, inviting us to grapple with the complex realities of ethnic conflict and to imagine new possibilities for a more just and equitable society. In the character of Mama Lang, we are confronted with a powerful symbol of the human cost of these ongoing struggles and a reminder of the urgent need for change.

The story "Embassy" portrays the lives of Tei and his long-standing acquaintance, Mama Lang, whom Tei has known since his childhood. The story elucidates Mama Lang's association with the KSU and his subsequent classification as a renegade, eluding the central counter-insurgency force, the 'Central Reserve Police Force' (CRPF). Mama Lang's account offers an insightful glimpse into his life during his tenure with the KSU, as well as his amorous relationship with his beloved Angela. The story reveals the poignant tale of Angela's tragic life, who toiled as a tea lady in a bank. Her father's demise due to tuberculosis and her mother's illness with the same disease left Angela to care for her five siblings while working at the bank. Angela, in a moment of destitution, resorted to seeking a loan from the bank, which was overseen by a non-tribal individual, a *dkhar*. It was in this moment of desperation that Angela approached the manager and attempted to establish a relationship. However, the *dkhar* manager, resorting to forceful measures, assaulted and threatened Angela, leading her to jump off a cliff, ultimately resulting in her untimely demise. Although the veracity of this narrative is challenged, given the numerous versions of the story, it is irrefutable that Mama Lang has been deeply affected by the tragic loss of his beloved and has turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with his grief. This incident has augmented his animosity towards *dkhars*, supplementing his perception of them as encroachers upon the stable life of the locals, displacing their presence and appropriating all lucrative job opportunities.

Within the liminal space of postcolonial Meghalaya, the story of Mama Lang and Angel provides a poignant narrative of the ways in which historical traumas reverberate through the present. Mama Lang's encounter with the non-tribal, or *dkhar*, acts as a catalyst for his profound resentment and deep-seated animosity towards the "other." Through his tragic love affair with Angel, we witness how the tensions between oppressor and oppressed, powerful and powerless, continue to manifest in the mundane and everyday. Mama Lang's perception of the *dkhar* as an encroacher, one who appropriates the best jobs and resources at the expense of the indigenous populace, reinforces the symbolic violence of colonialism and the anxieties of postcolonial identity. The paradoxical nature of Mama Lang's experience—simultaneously oppressed and oppressor, subaltern and subject—challenges the very foundations of our conceptions of identity, belonging, and power in this complex and contested terrain.

The story "Embassy" also discloses that the antagonism between the Khasis and the non-tribal inhabitants has seen some considerable abatement. Yet, the resurfacing of ethnic tensions cannot be negated. The author adroitly emphasises this point by highlighting the subtle ways in which *dkhars* are still required to exercise caution in conducting their businesses in this ostensibly 'safe' locale. Mama Lang, for his part, has come to terms with the passing of the KSU era, but his personal traumas continue to exert a profound influence on his psyche. The past is an inextricable part of Mama Lang's identity, and the collective memories of trauma that bind him and others like him to their shared history will always play a pivotal role in shaping their sense of self. The final line of the story, "Wounds ran deep in this hill-station town in the middle of nowhere" (Pariat, "Embassy" 215), evokes the enduring impact of these shared memories and collective histories on the formation of identity. In the nuanced interplay between past and present, personal and collective, the story deftly illuminates the complexities of identity formation in the context of deeply contested social and cultural terrains.

Pariat's narratives, thus, provide a meticulous and perceptive analysis of the intricate and multifaceted intricacies that underlie the politics surrounding the notions of belonging and unbelonging in the specific milieu of Meghalaya. Through

her literary oeuvre, Pariat adeptly navigates the intricate interplay of social, historical, and political factors that contribute to the configuration of cultural identity within the heterogeneous communities of the region. Her works shed light on the potential of cultural hybridity and negotiation to engender avenues for reconciliation and comprehension, even in the face of deeply entrenched disparities. Pariat's literary explorations furthermore serve as a poignant reminder of the persistent potential for establishing connections and nurturing a sense of community, provided that we approach divergent cultural perspectives with an empathetic and open-minded disposition.

## Note

[1]A portion of this chapter has been published during the research in a journal titled *Dialog*, No. 41 (Spring, 2023), ISSN: 0975-4881. pp. 223-235

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# CHAPTER SIX
# CONCLUSION

The texts selected for this study offer a profound exploration of the intricate complexities of identity, approaching it from diverse angles that expand our perceptual horizons. Janice Pariat, in her literary endeavours, bestows a compelling voice upon communities and individuals relegated to the margins. Through her narratives, she deftly captures and narrativises their lived experiences, allowing their voices to emerge from the periphery. Her storytelling becomes a conduit through which the lived experiences of these communities and individuals, typically consigned to the periphery, find resonance and representation. By weaving their narratives into the fabric of her fiction, she resists the erasure of these voices and presents an alternative perspective on identity. Her writing embodies a conscious commitment to addressing social inequalities, shedding light on the struggles and triumphs of these communities and individuals who have long been overlooked.

In embracing the periphery, Pariat's storytelling serves as an act of resistance against the dominant hegemony that tends to silence and marginalise certain voices. Thus, she illuminates the diverse landscapes of identity, fostering empathy, and challenging prevailing narratives. Pariat's work stands as a testament to the power of literature to transcend boundaries, to bridge divides, and to bring marginalised voices into the center of our collective consciousness.

Pariat's fictional works are distinctly characterised by the centrality of identity politics, particularly the marginalisation experienced by the marginalised community. Her works eloquently capture the perpetual struggles of marginalised groups in their quest for cultural, geographical, and political space, while also probing the subjectivity inherent in the construction of identity. In her collection *Boats on Land* (2012), by engaging with the historical trajectory of the Khasi community across various epochs — the colonial, post-colonial, and modern eras — Pariat's stories afford profound insights into their collective experiences. Notably, she delves into the rich tapestry of Khasi myths and belief systems, deftly interweaving these narratives with the ostensibly mundane and the surreal, thereby blurring the boundaries between reality and folklore. Her literary vision resounds with the coexistence of diverse realities in the northeast, encompassing the manifold experiences of the tribe throughout their storied history. Through her artful

storytelling, she endeavours to resurrect the pre-modern world by invoking Khasi myths, while simultaneously conscious of articulating enduring values that imbue their everyday lives. By doing so, her stories boldly endeavour to reclaim a distinctive Khasi identity, challenging and dismantling the entrenched stereotypes propagated by mainstream literature. In addition to illuminating the post-modern condition of Khasi society, Pariat's narratives also vividly depict the tumultuous political landscape of late twentieth-century Meghalaya, which serves as a compelling backdrop across many of her tales.

Within her collection, *Boats on Land*, Pariat deftly forges a 'Khasi vernacular style' that transcends conventional boundaries, anchoring itself upon the profound deployment of proverbs, myths, and indigenous belief systems that extend beyond mere dialogue. In other words, she seamlessly integrates these cultural components into the overall structure of the story, enriching the narrative with layers of meaning and cultural depth. These narratives, embellished with the resplendent tapestry of cultural beliefs, serve to evoke the vibrant cultural milieu while simultaneously lending credence to the cultural and historical authenticity intrinsic to each tale. It becomes evident in Pariat's stories that age-old sayings and cultural beliefs assume a paramount role within the very fabric of Khasi linguistic features. Herein, Pariat employs them to engender specific effects, be it in character delineation, the elucidation of tacitly expressed matters, or the enrichment of dialogical encounters.

The intertwining of myth and cultural beliefs assumes profound significance, not solely in terms of content, but as an integral facet of form within Pariat's narratives. In her stories, these elements not only serve to advance plotlines and thematic frameworks, but also to imbue dialogues and characterisations with a tantalising zest. Moreover, the frequent utilisation of indigenous language infuses her tales with an authentic indigenous essence, a subversive act of appropriation that emerges as a potent tool for the assertion of cultural identity. This is how Pariat indigenises the language of the colonisers with the insertion of indigenous linguistic features. This is an act of defiance, reclaiming agency by appropriating the coloniser's language to articulate alternative truths and subvert dominant frameworks.

At the crux of postcolonial studies, the concept of appropriation operates as a transformative force, engendering a reconstitution of the language rooted in the dominant center, allowing for the articulation of "differing cultural experiences" that diverge from the established norms (Ashcroft et al. 38). In a striking act of agency, appropriation seizes hold of the language emanating from the center and, in a gesture of defiance, supplants it with a discourse meticulously tailored to the colonised realm (37). Through this subversive act, the language undergoes a metamorphosis, bearing witness to the emergence of narratives and expressions that embody the multiplicity of postcolonial experiences. Within the domain of postcolonial literature, a multifaceted dialogue unfolds as writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o fervently challenge the utilisation of colonial languages, perceiving them as insidious "cultural bombs" wielded by imperial powers for the purpose of "spiritual subjugation" and dominance (3, 9). Conversely, writers such as Wole Soyinka advocate for a powerful act of resistance: writing back to the Empire. Consequently, a rich tapestry of creative cultural writings burgeons both in the former colonies and within the once-colonial metropolises. In navigating these artistic landscapes, postcolonial writers deftly employ linguistic strategies to give voice to indigenous themes. Ever since Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking linguistic experimentation, English has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis, adapting, appropriating, and assuming countless variations at the hands of postcolonial writers. Notably, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bapsi Sidhwa, Khaled Hosseini, Arundhati Roy, and others have made colossal contributions in this regard. The process of appropriation encompasses diverse strategies, birthing a multiplicity of "englishes." Some postcolonial writers skillfully merge linguistic structures from two distinct languages, engendering what Nemser and Selinker called "inter-culture" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 66). Furthermore, the seamless fusion of local language syntax with the lexical tapestry of English emerges as a recurrent feature within the realm of postcolonial writings.

Pariat's adept appropriation and indigenisation of the English language in her collection, *Boats on Land*, play a crucial role in imbuing her stories with cultural sensibilities and a distinct local essence. One notable technique employed by Pariat is

the strategic use of ‘glossing,’ which unveils an implicit gap between the word and its referent, transforming the glossed word into a profound cultural signifier. In the opening story, “A Waterfall of Horses,” Pariat intentionally employs the term “Ka ktien,” a resonant Khasi expression representing ‘spoken words,’ thereby introducing a nuanced interplay among language, meaning, and culture:

> How do I explain the word?
> *Ka ktien*.
> Say it. Out loud. *Ka ktien*. (3)

The meaning of certain words in Pariat’s narratives may not be immediately evident to Western English-speaking readers. However, through their repetitive usage, readers gradually grasp their contextual significance and the inherent intensity associated with them. Her use of unfamiliar words gradually exposes their significance, allowing readers to feel their weight. Terms like “rangbah shnong” (village headman) (“Echo Words” 55), “kumno” (greeting) (56), “pyrta shnong” (town crier) (“Dream” 73), “dorji” (tailor) (“19/87” 99, 101), “thoh teem” (gambling game) (103), and “khynnah dakaid” (bad boy) (“Laitlum” 135) hold cultural depth beyond mere translations. This deliberate strategy acknowledges the unique connotations these words carry in Meghalaya society, rooted in its history, cultural norms, and beliefs.

Pariat preserves untranslated words, allowing their meaning to emerge from context. This linguistic resistance in postcolonial texts challenges translation norms, revealing the presence of an ‘other’ language. Many postcolonial writers blend structures from multiple languages, creating an uncategorisable ‘inter-culture.’ The fusion of local syntax and English vocabulary is a common occurrence, navigating the boundaries of language and culture.

*Boats on Land* also showcases another technique known as ‘syntactic fusion’, a technique of using plurals in indigenous terms such as *dkhars* and *puris*. Pariat’s contextual framework diverges significantly from the English-speaking world, leading to the redefinition of specific terms, particularly those related to kinship. This redefinition arises from the contrasting kinship patterns in Khasi culture compared to

Western societies and other English-speaking communities. For example, the term ‘Bah’ signifies both an elder brother and a respectful salutation for a male older than the speaker. Similarly, ‘Kong’ denotes an elder sister, a married woman, or an older female relative with a shared parent. ‘Mama’ is used to refer to a maternal uncle. These kinship terms carry distinct meanings within the local narrative context. The deliberate use of these terms distinguishes the Khasi family institution from its Western counterparts, while also reflecting the intricate network of family relations and strong familial bonds within the Khasi community.

Pariat’s adept language appropriation and indigenisation, thus, showcase her as a postcolonial author, confidently expressing indigenous culture and identity. Incorporating indigenous languages in her narratives, she defies the limitations of the English language while portraying Khasi culture and society. Her interweaving of native expressions and structures enriches the English language with a Khasi sensibility, effectively conveying cultural experiences.

Pariat’s stories in *Boats on Land* can be interpreted as a form of realist fiction, as they authentically depict the lived experiences of the indigenous Khasis with their predominantly oral culture. Rather than imposing Western written traditions upon this culture, the stories subvert prevailing written structures that align with Western civilising and economic agendas. Through a predominantly oral narrative mode, Pariat’s stories assert the pre-colonial cultural values of the Khasis, which have been overshadowed by the dominance of written culture. The style, characterisation, and narrative structure of these stories harmoniously correspond to the cultural context they represent, effectively portraying an oral society. Furthermore, these stories can be seen as Pariat’s endeavour to reclaim the Khasis’ cultural heritage and identity, as well as to revive their pre-modern world and rich oral tradition. From a Fanonian perspective, her narratives can be understood as a deliberate return to mythic, mystical, and cultural traditions, aiming to regain control over the representation of their identity. While the incorporation of myths in fictional works varies among authors, Pariat’s stories in this collection demonstrate a shared concern regarding the relationship between people and their land, the construction of ethnicity, and the narration of the self through language.

The utilisation of myths in narrating personal and cultural experiences presents myth as an alternative history. However, the author's invocation of ideological impulses inherent in these myths remains a crucial consideration. Pariat, for example, constructs the protagonists' fates around myths and legends such as water fairies/spirits embodied in the 'golden masheer' (in the "Dream of the Golden Masheer"), the myth of old mantras (in the "Echo Words"), and the myth of the mischievous spirit *suidtynjang* (in "The Discovery of Flight"). Through these mythic narratives, she communicates the primal understanding of human fate, contrasting it with modern scientific explanations. This incorporation of the mytheme holds significant ideological implications, particularly when Pariat juxtaposes it against the erosion of indigenous worldviews by dominant narratives of the modern world.

Pariat's narratives prominently emphasise the presence of myths and traditional customs deeply rooted in the collective memory of the people. The recurrent inclusion of oral and folk elements in her stories can be seen as an effort to revitalise the tribal theosophy that once shaped the traditional Khasis way of life. Bhalchandra Nemade aptly asserts that oral literature, with its regional nuances, "geographic details," and "dialectical [linguistic] features," splendidly reflects the indigenous spirit, possessing a "universal appeal" for precisely those reasons (200). Oral narratives serve as markers of cultural identity, and the significance of oral tradition lies in the desire to establish one's individual or communal belonging to a specific belief system, countering any misrepresentations. D. Venkat Rao suggests that the retrieval of cultural symbols and identity can be achieved through the vibrant and rich realm of oral narratives:

> The valleys and hills [of north east] that surround us bear testimonies to a violent subjection to a mode of being that required a more radical violent erasure of other rhythms and modes of being. Elimination of a morung, discrediting a performative tradition concerning say, stone-pulling, head-hunting or mithun sacrifice, wipes out millennial memories of putting the body to work and rendering mnemopraxial responsibility to what one receives and lives with. (52)

Pariat's stories navigate the intricate realm between myth and reality, blending elements of myth, legends, magic, traditional beliefs, scientific progress, and logical explanations. They capture the transitional phase from traditional to modern ways of life, existing between these contrasting worlds. While supernatural elements permeate her narratives, they are firmly grounded in the everyday lives, struggles, and experiences of ordinary individuals. In the lives of the Khasis, the supernatural and the uncanny thus co-existed with the real. Here, the spoken word holds immense power, as depicted in the narrator's assertion in "A Waterfall of Horses" that "everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, ka ktien" (Pariat 12). Through oral tradition, the spoken word bridges the present with the past, connecting present experiences to historical moments. The story exemplifies how the horrific and supernatural conclusion finds its origins in the chants of an old man known as Nong Knia or "the bearer of words," who wields the power of language to vanquish enemies (12).

Belief in mantras, magic, and fairies deeply permeates Khasi life, yet the rise of Western Christianity and modernisation has suppressed these voices. Nevertheless, these voices persist and resurface when the community encounters inexplicable or supernatural phenomena, as seen in the community's response to the disappearance of the French lady anthropologist and her translator, Malcolm, in the story "Echo Words."

Postcolonial indigenous writers effectively use literature to represent and redefine their cultural identity, addressing threats posed by globalisation and modernisation. Pariat's writings focus on the relocation and revitalisation of indigenous cultural identity, incorporating elements of folklore, myth, and cultural beliefs to challenge stereotypes and misrepresentation. Postmodernists like Lyotard aim to dismantle authoritarian narratives and emphasise marginalised, liminal, and fragmented narratives. Following Foucault's power/knowledge concept, Lyotard argues that knowledge is now a commodity associated with acquiring power. The status of knowledge is constantly changing due to its acquisition, storage, and dissemination, influencing one's sense of self and identity:

> The human child is already positioned as the referent of a story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will evidently chart his course. (15)

Within the selected works of fiction, namely *Seahorse* (2014), *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017), and selected stories from *Boats on Land*, the themes of homosexuality and queerness are prominently articulated. These texts offer a discerning examination of how individuals navigate their identities within the broader sociocultural landscape. By closely scrutinising these narratives, one can unravel the subtle nuances that shape our understanding of the intricate complexities of human desire and its manifold expressions and experiences. Through the lens of literature, we can unearth the underlying tensions and paradoxes that arise at the intersection of identity, desire, and the societal forces that influence them. Pariat's novel *Seahorse* and the selected stories from *Boats on Land* present a complex and empathetic exploration of the multifaceted ways in which identity is constructed and encountered. Her vision of identity stands in stark contrast to the conventional notion of a fixed and static essence. Her literary works embrace the notions of multiplicity and pluralism as fundamental characteristics of identity, reflecting the diverse and dynamic nature of today's society. By delving into the complexities of postmodern sexual identity, Pariat offers a potent critique of the stigmatisation and marginalisation historically associated with non-normative desires. By contesting prevailing cultural narratives that pathologise and marginalise the LGBTQ+ individuals, her works open up new possibilities for comprehending and celebrating the diverse range of sexual identities that constitute the fabric of our social world.

In *Seahorse*, Pariat skillfully weaves a narrative that encompasses themes of love, loss, pain, betrayal, and trauma, all set within a society that punishes non-conformity and upholds adherence to social norms. The novel delves into the intricacies of these norms and the human psyche, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, it explores the psychological toll of deviating from societal expectations in a world that demands conformity. Pariat's narrative transcends the confines of fixed identities, presenting a fluid and non-compartmentalised perspective on sexuality. Desire is portrayed as a medium of

expression that surpasses the limitations of gender binaries. It emerges as an innate aspect of existence, analogous to the seahorse's inclination towards both sexes.

Pariat's use of the Poseidon and Pelops myth as a conceptual frame for Nem and Nicholas's relationship surpasses mere allusion, extending to the symbolism of the seahorse. The seahorse represents resilience, beauty, and queerness:

> Seahorses are strange creatures. . . . They mate for long, if not for life. . . . They belong to that rarest of fish families marked by male pregnancy.
>
> And, most marvellous of all, they dance. . . . They change colour. (*Seahorse* 114)

Like the seahorse, queer individuals face marginalisation despite their inherent strength and beauty. Pariat's seahorse emblem highlights the resilience and beauty of queer identity. Moreover, the seahorse subverts gender norms and expectations, symbolising queer identity and resistance. Its ability to change colour and shape embodies the fluidity of queer identities.

Pariat's focus on the flexibility and fluidity of individual identity becomes apparent, emphasising the queer body as a site of resistance against the heteronormative and heterosexist social order. In this vein, Hostetler and Herdt assert that identity and subject positions are "fluid, dynamic, and multiply determined," prompting inquiries into the ontological foundations of the categories 'gay' and 'lesbian' (252). They further argue that "queer" signifies an "open, multiperspectival, and fluid . . . conceptual space from which to contest . . . a heteronormative and heterosexist social order" (253). This fluidity of identity is perceptible within the text, as Nicholas comments on the sculpture's flexibility and fluidity of value and identity:

> This is how I looked at sculpture, as fundamentally social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication, but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans. Often, religious historians and art historians privilege the moment of an object's creation as the essential meaning of the object . . . but some of us hold that

> subsequent reinterpretations are equally important and equally worthy of enquiry. Would a person's biography be confined to an account of his or her birth? No. Objects come to be animated with new significances. (*Seahorse* 160)

Nicholas' remark here resonates with Foucault's concept of "discursive" formations, referring to language and knowledge systems that shape our perception and comprehension of the surrounding world. According to Foucault, meaning is not inherent but instead emerges and persists through continuous interactions and interpretations (*The Archaeology* 48-49). Furthermore, Nicholas' criticism of the privilege placed by art and religious historians on the moment of an object's creation reveals the impact of power dynamics on the construction of meaning.

In a society deeply entrenched in the discourse of heteronormativity, behaviours considered to fall outside established boundaries are promptly branded as 'shameful' and 'disgraceful.' The normative narrative constructs rigid dichotomies between acceptable and deviant relationships and desires, leading to the marginalisation and exclusion of those who exist beyond its confines. For instance, the two female protagonists in the story "Boats on Land," compare their condition to "boats stranded on land," unable to navigate the waters of normative society, feeling an "awkwardness" in their place in the world (Pariat, "Boats on Land" 198). This peculiar sense of otherness stems directly from the normative discourse's insistence on heteronormativity as the exclusive valid way of being. However, this otherness also presents a challenge to the normative discourse itself, as it disrupts claims of universality and reveals the reliance on exclusionary practices to maintain its authoritative position. Through their resistance to the normative narrative, the two female protagonists offer glimpses into alternative modes of existence and love that transcend the boundaries of heteronormativity.

In Pariat's fictions, same-sex relationships often embody therapeutic qualities and psychological fulfillment, while opposite-sex relationships tend to lead to despair and animosity. Characters like Nem, Nicholas, and unnamed female narrators challenge societal norms and subvert normative discourses without succumbing to

guilt or shame. They dismantle the boundaries imposed by religious and societal institutions, revealing the fragility of normative structures. Their resistance and resilience serve as catalysts for dismantling oppressive frameworks, inviting alternative modes of existence and rupturing the homogenising grip of society. Pariat's characters offer emancipatory possibilities beyond narrow conceptions of gender, sex, and desire.

Pariat's narratives, thus, align with the postmodernist ethos by giving marginalised individuals a resounding voice, unveiling their hidden realities within the grand narratives of mainstream discourse. In her novel, *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, she optimistically embodies postmodernist notions of 'fragmented narratives' and 'shifting perspectives,' reflecting the fluid nature of truth itself. Through a fragmented narrative technique, the story unfolds through the diverse viewpoints of nine unnamed characters, each recounting their encounters and memories with the enigmatic protagonist. This narrative approach, thus, challenges the notion of an authoritative narrative voice, embracing the polyphony of subjective viewpoints. The fragmented structure of the novel echoes postmodern scepticism towards grand narratives, favouring a kaleidoscope of perspectives and multiple interpretations.

In *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, Pariat's narrative approach intentionally abstains from assigning names to characters and avoids imposing fixed identities, particularly on the central character. This deliberate choice reflects her resistance to rigid sexual identity categories, instead perceiving them as fragmented, fluid, and performative. This resonates with Butler's critique of identity classifications like 'gay' or 'lesbian,' which aligns with her pioneering intellectual movement of queer theory. Building upon Derrida's ideas, Butler's gender discourse challenges essentialist and biological notions of gender and sexual identity, advocating for a performative understanding. In her influential essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991), Butler discredits identity categories, including 'lesbian' and 'gay,' as tools employed by regulatory systems to maintain oppressive structures or as rallying points for contestation against such oppression (558).

Additionally, Pariat's *Boats on Land*, also delves into various themes including ethnic identity, the intricate link between violence and identity, and the politics of belonging and unbelonging within the context of Meghalaya. Profound insights into the complexities of identity formation and the politics surrounding belonging and unbelonging in the region have been vividly portrayed in works such as "19/87," "Laitlum," and "Embassy". Pariat's stories vividly portray the political unrest between the Khasis and non-Khasis (*dkhars*/outsiders) in Shillong after Meghalaya's statehood. She provides a depiction of the socio-cultural and economic realities of both the Khasis and non-Khasis during and after the colonial era. Contrary to the common perception that newcomers should be met with suspicion or hostility in a new social environment, Pariat advocates for an inclusive approach that embraces the unfamiliar rather than marginalising or ostracising them. By illustrating the potential for genuine human connections across cultural and social boundaries, her works strive to dismantle the artificial construct of a pure Khasi identity.

Pariat's stories effectively capture the social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions of the Khasi community, showcasing their experiences in the aftermath of the ethnic conflicts in Meghalaya in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Specifically, the short stories "19/87" and "Laitlum" aptly depict the contrasting ideologies prevalent during the tumultuous period in Shillong. These ideologies revolved around choosing between embracing ethnic nationalist propaganda and seeking peaceful resolutions to the conflict. "19/87" amplifies non-normative and alternative perspectives on notions of belonging and indigeneity in a specific locale. Thus Pariat challenges the concept of cultural purity through her narrative.

Pariat's narrative, thus, demonstrates the politicisation of the tribal-non-tribal dichotomy in Meghalaya, resulting in the portrayal of non-tribal groups as encroachers who infringe upon the economic and socio-political rights of the indigenous people, leading to persistent conflicts over several decades. In "19/87," Pariat employs the titular slash (/) as a symbol of the boundary between the Khasis and non-Khasis. The intention is to challenge the common assumption that strangers should be met with suspicion or hostility while crossing societal boundaries. She also advocates for an inclusive approach that recognises the value of engaging with

strangers rather than marginalising or excluding them. As Mara Matta has argued, this intimate glimpse at the life of the *dkhar* [Suleiman] is the author's intention of disproving "a necessary repositioning of the stranger in the sphere of the enemy" and exploring "a possibility of sociation with the outsider as a friend" (52). In this way, the story thus tries to "deconstruct the artificial idea of a pure khasiness" (53).

"19/87" can be seen as a significant experiment in social history or a work that challenges conventional assumptions about tribal history. The protagonist, Suleiman, assumes the role of the 'outsider/within,' a concept developed by Patricia Collins, revealing a nuanced and complex identity shaped by navigating societal norms while participating in their conventions. His ability to navigate the complexities of his social environment and negotiate ethnic and religious boundaries highlights his adaptability and resilience. Suleiman's identification with the 'outsider/within' and his pursuit of cultural capital highlight the intricate process of constructing identity in stratified societies, emphasising the role of cultural practices in shaping one's social position.

In the specific context of northeast India, minority groups that do not pose an actual threat to the dominant majority are also often perceived as obstructing the promotion of a sub-national ethnos and cultural purity. These 'minority others' are seen as an additional presence that does not conform to the cultural imagination of a homogeneous group upholding specific majoritarian ideas and cultural values. This growing hostility towards minority others is expressed through a "narcissistic process" in nationalism, as conceptualised by Arjun Appadurai, where the majority is mobilised to believe that they are at risk of becoming a minority themselves, while fearing that minorities could become the dominant force (51). This process leads to the emergence of predatory identities, which claim the need for the extinction of another collective for their own survival.

To speak of 'the fear of small numbers' is to engage in a discourse of exclusion that seeks to preserve the cultural purity and exclusivity of the dominant majority. This fear, as identified by Appadurai, is rooted in the premise that the mere existence of a minority other poses a threat to the identity of the majority. In the story

"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 contamination. Suleiman's mere presence serves as a reminder of the fragility of the dominant group's identity, subjecting him to constant scrutiny and marginalisation. Such is the nature of the discourse of exclusion, where the other is always perceived as a potential threat to the self.

In the story "Laitlum," Pariat depicts the Khasi people's struggle to preserve their cultural identity and territorial integrity. The title itself conveys their strong desire to safeguard their ethnicity and land, with 'Laitlum' symbolising the ancestral homeland that holds deep significance for the Khasi people. Their culture, identity, and history are intimately intertwined with the land, making it an inseparable part of their existence. Politicians and communal groups exploit this attachment to incite the younger generation's animosity towards immigrant intruders, resulting in inter-ethnic conflicts. While outsiders encountered minimal resistance during British rule, the Khasi people now resist their presence as a violation of their territorial sovereignty. Although the exact cause of the late 1980s unrest in Shillong remains undisclosed in the story, it unfolds gradually.

Pariat's exploration of self-identity within the Khasi community reveals the crucial role it plays in maintaining their distinction from non-indigenous communities. The boundaries established between these groups reflect a power dynamic that allows the Khasi people to assert dominance over minority non-indigenous groups. Moreover, cultural stereotypes are employed to perpetuate this dynamic, often rooted in ethnocentric prejudices.

Pariat's narratives also highlights how inter-group comparisons in inter-cultural contexts reveal cultural stereotypes that reinforce asymmetrical relations, impacting social interactions and broader relationships among the Khasi community in Meghalaya. Ethnic identity serves as a marker reinforcing differentiation from non-indigenous counterparts, reflecting underlying power dynamics. Characters in the stories like Suleiman, Chris, and Melvin long for a sense of belonging in Shillong, but encounter inter-group conflicts and cultural stereotyping, leading to

violent outbursts. This deprivation hinders their development of belongingness. They seek belonging through friendship and a connection to Laitlum, representing their quest for home in a disconnected world. Amidst inter-ethnic conflict and stereotypes, feeling unhomed erodes belonging, causing alienation and destabilised identities.

In her other story, "Embassy", Pariat also offers a profound and insightful portrayal of the lasting effects of historical traumas in post-colonial Meghalaya. Through the narratives of Mama Lang and Angel, Pariat vividly portrays how power dynamics and tensions between the oppressor and the oppressed persist in everyday life. This is evident in Mama Lang's deep-rooted animosity towards the non-tribal, *dkhars*, as encroachers and exploiters. In the story, Pariat challenges conventional notions of identity, belonging, and power by exposing the paradoxical nature of Mama Lang's experiences as both oppressed and oppressor, subaltern and superior. While ethnic tensions may have somewhat subsided, the story reminds us of the ongoing need for caution among non-tribal residents, underscoring the enduring influence of personal traumas on individual psyches. By skillfully navigating contested social and cultural landscapes, Pariat illuminates the intricate interplay between personal and collective histories, foregrounding the profound impact of shared memories on identity formation. In this regard, the story serves as a compelling testament to the complex processes involved in shaping identities within such contested terrains.

Janice Pariat's literary works, thus, present a nuanced and intricate dynamics underlying the politics of belonging and unbelonging in the specific context of Meghalaya. Through her literary explorations, she skillfully navigates the complex interplay of social, historical, and political factors that influence the formation of cultural identity among the diverse communities in the region. Her works emphasise the potential for cultural hybridity and negotiation to facilitate pathways towards reconciliation and understanding, even in the face of deeply ingrained differences. Ultimately, Pariat's writing serves as a compelling reminder of the enduring capacity for connection and community, provided that we approach cultural diversity with empathy and a receptive mindset.

Janice Pariat's literary corpus offers profound insights into the intricate dynamics and pluralistic dimensions underlying identity formation in the specific sociocultural context of Meghalaya and northeast India. Through her nuanced portrayal of marginalised voices and exploration of liminal spaces, Pariat skillfully excavates the interstitial terrains between fixed categorisations of identity, belonging, and desire. Her works highlight the fluid, heterogeneous, and multifaceted nature of identity, challenging essentialist perspectives.

By incorporating indigenous languages, cultural symbols, and oral traditions into her writings, Pariat engages in an act of artistic appropriation and literary indigenisation. This represents a potent postcolonial strategy for articulating cultural distinctiveness and contesting dominant narratives. Pariat's strategic deployment of postmodernist literary techniques such as fragmented narration, shifting viewpoints, and open-endedness aligns with the postmodern ethos of embracing multiplicity while resisting totalising metanarratives. Her emphasis on ambiguity and irresolution encapsulates the instability of truth claims and meaning-making systems.

Pariat's literary narratives also offer emancipatory possibilities for reconceptualising notions of identity, sexuality, ethnicity, and belonging in more expansive, inclusive, and hybrid frameworks. By foregrounding marginalised voices and experiences, her writings serve as a compelling testament to literature's capacity to challenge boundaries, nurture empathy, and illuminate overlooked perspectives. Her literary praxis represents a pivotal contribution towards elucidating the nuances underlying identity construction within fluid intercultural contexts marked by complex power relations and contentious histories.

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1. Published an article titled “Rethinking the Unconscious: A Ubiquitous and Adaptive System in the Living World” in *Wisdom Speaks* Vol. 8, July 2023; a UGC CARE-Listed journal published by Indian National Forum of Art and Culture. ISSN: 2456-5121.
2. Published an article titled “Fictional Narratives of the Boroks: A Study in Counter-Narrative” in the book *Indigeneity: Expression and Experience* edited by Cherrie L. Chhangte and Kristina Z. Zama, published by Mittal Publications, 2019. ISBN: 978-8183249362
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5. Published an article titled “The Politics of (Un)Belonging: Critiquing Select Short Fictions by Janice Pariat” in *Dialog*, No. 41 (Spring, 2023) pp. 223-235. ISSN: 2319-6041.
6. Presented a paper titled “Voicing the Pandemic Pain: Critiquing Select Writings on Covid Pandemic from Mizoram” at the Two Day International Virtual Conference on “Post Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections and Realities” organised by NIT Agartala from 5$^{th}$ to 6$^{th}$ of August, 2022.
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8. Presented a paper titled “Reverencing the Human Soul: Mafaa Hauhnar‟s Poetical Reflections” at the Two Day International Seminar on Writings of

Mafaa Hauhnar" jointly organised by St. Anthony's College and Department of Mizo, Mizoram University from 30 th to 31st March, 2022.

9. Presented a paper titled "Land as a Marker of Identity: A Study of Contemporary Borok Poetry in Translation" at the Two Day National Seminar on Rethinking Tribal Identity" organised by Department of English, Mizoram University under UGC SAP DRS II from 28th to 29th March, 2019.
10. Presented a paper titled "Postmodern Perspectives on Sexual Identity and Queer Desire: A Reading of Janice Pariat‟s Select Fictions." at the Two Day International Seminar on "Advancing Sustainable Development Goals: Promoting Health, Well-Being and Gender Equality" jointly organised by Department of Psychology, Mizoram University in collaboration with Global Forum for Sustainable Rural Development from 8th to 9th June, 2023.
11. Published a book titled *Awptu Ngaihawm: Contemporary Literary Theories*, published by Gilzom, 2022. ISBN: 978-9357179515
12. Published a book titled *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below* published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2023. Forthcoming. ISBN: 9781527530416
13. Edited a book titled *Zamtlang Daifim: Collection of Poems* published by Zamzo Publications, 2022.
14. Edited a book titled *Thu Rimawi: Collection of Kuki-Mizo Poems* published by Govt. of Tripura, 2023.
15. Published a book *The Blue Guitar: The Adventure of Tec Tillon* published by Notion Press, 2022. ISBN: 979-8887726748.

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# ABSTRACT

# INTERROGATING IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF THE FICTIONAL NARRATIVES OF JANICE PARIAT

**AN ABSTRACT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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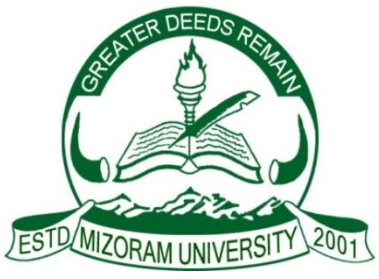


**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURE STUDIES**
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# Interrogating Identities:
# A Study of the Fictional Narratives of Janice Pariat

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Submitted
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The literary expressions from India's Northeast region have long been relegated to the margins of the nation's larger literary tradition. However, this scenario is undergoing a positive transformation recently due to increased academic attention and initiating discussions, and the attention garnered from literary festivals across India (Pou, "Literary Traditions" 307). This shift has sparked intriguing conversations and brought the region's literary voices to the forefront, initiating a much-needed dialogue and recognition. The delayed recognition of literature from the Northeast cannot be attributed solely to the belated advent of written language among its diverse communities; rather, it is also a consequence of the geographic and political isolation that these territories have endured, a legacy of the colonial encounter. Despite the age-old existence of established literary traditions in languages like Assamese and Manipuri (Nongkynrih 172), these expressions have been marginalised and ignored within the dominant narratives of Indian literature (Pou, "Literary Traditions" 307; Misra xvi). It is only through the disruptive force of insurgency and the articulation of anti-national sentiments that these peripheral voices have gained a tenuous attention within the wider Indian consciousness (Pou, "Literary Cultures" 1). However, this recognition has been predicated upon a fetishisation of the region's literature, with major publishing houses capitalising on the exoticism and political sensitivity of these writings, rather than engaging much with their aesthetic and artistic merits.

Tilottoma Misra problematises the hegemonic trajectory of the colonial civilising mission in the Northeast, locating a paradigmatic shift wherein contemporary writers have revalorised the oral as the privileged locus of their unique cultural heritage ("Speaking, Writing" 24). This insurrectionary praxis of excavating identity and recuperating cultural uniqueness represents a subversive riposte to the dominant ideologico-discursive formation that has persistently marginalised their cultural heterogeneity. The advent of print culture, concomitant to the colonial interventionist project, systematically relegated the indigenous oral traditions into a disavowed exteriority, privileging the written word as a signifier of authority and civilisation (Misra 14; Sarma 38). It is against this discursive backdrop that writers like Janice Pariat have mounted a concerted insurrection, textualising and hybridising

the oral elements to reclaim their precolonial cultural distinctiveness (Swaraj and Mishra 131).

The tumultuous political history of the Northeast, marked by insurgency and ethnic tensions, has left an indelible imprint on the region's literary expressions. Fictional texts by authors like Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Temsula Ao, and Malsawmi Jacob exemplify an exploration of insurgency themes, memorialising the people's agonies. However, confining contemporary literature solely to themes of conflict and insurgency would overlook the inherent diversity across the constituent states, each with its distinct cultural, historical, and experiential characteristics reflected in unique literary sensibilities and techniques. Writings from Meghalaya, for instance, engage with the state's unique socio-cultural and political realities, such as interethnic conflicts, ethnic exclusion, and displacement of non-tribal communities. Yet, amid the rhetoric of cultural purity, writers across ethnic boundaries — including indigenous voices like Janice Pariat and Dhariba Lyndem, as well as non-tribal perspectives from Anjum Hasan — forge a literary space that advocates peaceful coexistence, disrupting the rigid binaries of ethnic identity politics. However, this does not mean that Writings from Meghalaya is limited to ethnic identity and insider-outsider dynamics alone, but also delving into the fluid dynamics of sexual identity as well. Specifically, Pariat's literary narratives offer insightful perspectives on the fluid dynamics between heterosexual and homosexual paradigms, providing significant deconstructive voices in the discourse. While most writings and literary studies from the region often focus on ethnicity and identity, she goes beyond by exploring the lived experiences of the queer community, an area largely overlooked in Northeast literature. Through her work, Pariat contributes to challenging the longstanding heteronormative frameworks that have traditionally shaped discussions and regulations around gender and sexuality.

The present research is a study of the fictional narratives of Janice Pariat — *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* (2012), *The Nine-Chambered Heart* (2017) and *Seahorse* (2014). The use of the plural form 'identities' in the title of this study signifies an acknowledgement of the multifaceted and fluid nature of identity, as explored within the literary works of Pariat. By examining identity formation

complexities, the selected works for this study engage with the intricate and nuanced facets of identity. Pariat, in her fictional narratives, encapsulates diverse thematic agendas. Notably, a prominent thematic focus within her works revolves around the exploration of both personal and cultural identity. She delves into the intricacies entailed in the construction of identities, deftly accounting for the manifold influences of heritage, historical backdrop, and sociocultural contexts. By employing adept narrative techniques, Pariat skillfully captures the arduous journey individuals undertake in their pursuit of a sense of belonging, all while navigating the inherent tensions arising from the interplay between tradition and modernity.

Janice Pariat was born in Jorhat, Assam, and grew up in Shillong and various places in Assam. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and a Master's in History of Art and/or Archaeology from SOAS University of London. Pariat is celebrated as one of Northeast India's prominent writers and the first from Meghalaya to receive a Sahitya Akademi award in English category. Her debut collection of short stories, *Boats on Land*, earned several accolades, as did her novel *Seahorse*. She is also known for her novella, *The Nine-Chambered-Heart*, published in multiple languages. Pariat's latest novel, *Everything the Light Touches* (2022), has been shortlisted for the 'AutHer Awards 2023.' Besides her literary pursuits, she has served as a 'Charles Wallace Creative Writing Fellow' and a 'Writer in Residence' in South Korea. Pariat currently teaches Creative Writing and History of Art at Ashoka University, India.

Pariat's fictional works are distinctly characterised by the centrality of identity politics, particularly the marginalisation experienced by the marginalised community. Her works eloquently capture the perpetual struggles of marginalised groups in their quest for cultural, geographical, and political space while also probing the subjectivity inherent in the construction of identity. In her collection *Boats on Land*, Pariat skillfully engages with the Khasi community's historical trajectory across colonial, post-colonial, and modern epochs, yielding profound insights into their collective experiences. Through her deft interweaving of Khasi myths and belief systems with the seemingly mundane and surreal, Pariat blurs the boundaries between reality and folklore, resonating with diverse coexisting realities in the

Northeast. Through her artful storytelling, she endeavours to resurrect the pre-modern world by invoking Khasi myths while simultaneously being conscious of articulating enduring values that imbue their everyday lives. By doing so, her stories boldly attempt to reclaim a distinctive Khasi identity, challenging and dismantling the entrenched stereotypes propagated by mainstream literature.

**Chapter One**

**Introduction: Pariat and Her Milieu**

The introductory chapter provides an overview of the sociocultural context of Meghalaya and the Khasi community, as well as an overview of the primary texts that will be examined — the short story collection *Boats on Land*, the novel *Seahorse*, and *The Nine-chambered Heart*. It outlines the demographic makeup of Meghalaya, describing the three major tribes — Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias — as well as other smaller ethnic groups. It traces the history of British colonial rule in the region and the establishment of the Indian state of Meghalaya in 1972. The chapter also discusses the ethnic conflicts between indigenous tribes and non-local migrant groups that arose in the 1970s-1990s.

Subsequently, it introduces Janice Pariat as a Khasi writer whose fictional endeavours exhibit a discerning emphasis on facets of identity, marginalisation, queerness, and the weaving of myth into everyday reality. The chapter also outlines the central concerns of the research — examining the multiple identities portrayed in Pariat's works, how her characters navigate societal expectations, and what insights her stories offer into the complexities of human existence. The key facets of identity to be analysed include cultural, gender, racial, ethnic, and sexual identities. The chapter thus provides the necessary background and context for the in-depth textual analysis to follow.

**Chapter Two**

**Rethinking Identity**

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework for the study by delving into a meticulous exploration of the multiple determinants of identity, as articulated across diverse academic disciplines. Through an examination of the impacts of mid-

twentieth century sociopolitical movements and the concurrent emergence of contemporary literary theories, this chapter aims to elucidate the ways in which such theories have effectively challenged deeply entrenched and conventional essentialist perceptions of identity as rigid and unchanging. Instead, they have ushered in a paradigmatic shift towards a more fluid and dynamic conceptualisation of identities. Informed by these theoretical trajectories, the chapter unveils the dynamic and fluid nature of identity through a comprehensive analysis. It examines how, in the recent decades, these theoretical frameworks have redefined notions of identity, transitioning from entrenched essentialism to a more flexible and evolving conceptualisation. The impact of these identity politics is particularly foregrounded within the context of literary studies, revealing literature as an agile platform for the intricate negotiation and exploration of a diverse spectrum of identities.

The chapter is attentive to the Khasi/Northeast region's literary voices, emphasising their role in authentically capturing the cultural and community ethos. It closely examines the region's postcolonial struggle, underlining endeavours for sociopolitical agency. A key facet of the chapter lies in its analysis of the inherent ideological contradictions underlying identity formation.

**Chapter Three**
**Myth and Identity**

This chapter explores the diverse conceptions of myth and identity as manifested within the selected primary texts. This inquiry offers an insightful perspective into Pariat's distinctive narrative technique, highlighting her adept interweaving of mythological elements with the fabric of reality within her narratives. This creative endeavour is positioned as an act of resistance and counter-discourse. The chapter engages in a comprehensive analysis of selected short stories from the collection, *Boats on Land*.

The stories in *Boats on Land* span various historical phases — colonial, post-colonial, and modern — capturing the tribulations of the Khasi tribe through the ages. By creatively invoking Khasi myths and belief systems, Pariat strives to resurrect the pre-modern Khasi world, asserting the community's distinct cultural

identity. Her stories can be considered 'realist fiction' as they authentically depict the lived experiences of the predominantly oral Khasi culture, rather than interpreting it through the lens of Western written traditions. A key aspect of Pariat's literary strategy is the deliberate incorporation of Khasi proverbs, myths, and indigenous beliefs into the narratives. These elements not only advance the plot but also lend a distinctive indigenous flavour to the dialogues and character portrayals. For instance, the story "Echo Words" centrally features the mythological motifs surrounding the *nongshohnoh* (commissioned kidnappers) and the *Thlen* (a malevolent serpentine entity), which are deeply ingrained in Khasi folklore. Similarly, the *puri* (water fairy) plays a transformative role in the narrative progression of "Dream of the Golden Mahseer." The strategic use of indigenous terminology and narrative style serves as a powerful means of asserting the Khasis' cultural identity, particularly in the face of dominant colonial and mainstream literary traditions. Her stories can be seen as an act of "appropriation" or "indigenization," where she harnesses colonial linguistic and literary tools to construct alternative truths and contest dominant narratives. Appropriation transforms the language, giving rise to narratives embodying diverse postcolonial experiences (Ashcroft et al. 37).

Pariat skillfully appropriates and indigenises the English language in *Boats on Land* to assert the distinct cultural identity of the Khasi community. She employs various linguistic strategies to infuse her narratives with regional sensibilities and challenge dominant Western literary traditions. One key technique she utilises is 'glossing' — the strategic elucidation of indigenous Khasi terms that reveal an implicit void between words and their referents. For instance, the phrase '*ka ktien*,' meaning 'spoken words,' is repeatedly used to herald a subtle interplay between language, meaning, and culture, and also to create profound cultural signifiers:

> How do I explain the word?
> *Ka ktien*.
> Say it. Out loud. *Ka ktien*. ("A Waterfall" 3)

Other terms like '*rangbah shnong'* (village headman) ("Echo Words" 55) and '*kumno*' (Khasi greeting) ("Echo Words" 56) are gradually imbued with contextual

connotations, challenging the Anglophone reader's assumptions. Pariat also preserves certain Khasi words in their original, untranslated state, creating a linguistic resistance that acknowledges the presence of an 'other' language. The fusion of local language syntax with English lexical forms, such as the use of plurals like '*dkhars*' and '*puris*,' further exemplifies her 'syntactic fusion' strategy. These techniques highlight how new lexical forms can emerge in English by employing the structures of other languages. Moreover, the author redefines certain terms pertaining to Khasi kinship patterns, which diverge significantly from Western constructs. Words like '*Bah*' (elder brother), '*Kong*' (elder sister/married woman), and '*Mama*' (maternal uncle) encode the intricate web of familial relations and the veneration inherent in the indigenous context.

Through a primarily oral narrative mode, Pariat's stories assert the pre-colonial cultural ethos of the Khasis, countering the dominance of written traditions. The style, characterisations, and narrative structure harmoniously resonate with the cultural context, vividly portraying an oral society. From a Fanonian perspective, Pariat's narratives can be understood as a deliberate reconnection to mythic, mystical, and cultural traditions aimed at regaining agency over identity representation. The utilisation of myths in narrating personal and cultural experiences presents myth as an alternative history. However, the author's engagement with the ideological underpinnings inherent in these myths remains pivotal. Pariat weaves protagonists' destinies around myths and legends, exemplified by the 'golden masheer' in the story "Dream of the Golden Masheer," the myth of old mantras in "Echo Words," and the mischievous spirit 'suidtynjang' in "The Discovery of Flight." Through these mythic narratives, she conveys a primal understanding of human fate, counterposing it against modern scientific explanations. This incorporation of the mythic mytheme holds profound ideological implications, especially when juxtaposed with the erosion of indigenous worldviews by dominant narratives of modernity.

The recurrent inclusion of oral and folk elements in Pariat's literary narratives can be seen as an effort to revitalise the tribal theosophy that once shaped the traditional Khasi way of life. While supernatural elements permeate her narratives,

they are firmly grounded in the everyday lives, struggles, and experiences of ordinary individuals. In the lives of the Khasis, the supernatural and the uncanny thus coexisted with the real. Here, the spoken word holds immense power, as depicted in the narrator's assertion in "A Waterfall of Horses" that "everything we know about the world is in the sound of our words, ka ktien" (Pariat 12).

This authorial attempt at retrieving orality and premodern lifeworlds and the textualization of oral elements in postcolonial literature should not be seen as mere romanticism or nostalgic atavism, but as an emergent aesthetic that conveys present-day complexities. Elevating orality as a counterpoint to modern literate traditions is a strategic act of resistance and appropriation — a decolonial reclamation of abjected cultural identity. This interstitial resistance, enacted through the resurgence of the oral, becomes a site of enunciation for the subaltern. It is within this liminal space that the marginalized subjects of Northeast India assert their agency, negotiating identity and heritage, and challenging the hegemonic narratives that relegated their rich oral tradition to insignificance.

## Chapter Four

## Sexual Identity: Queering Pariat's Fictional Characters

The queer community in Northeast India is configured as doubly othered, first through their ethnocultural differentiation from the majoritarian Indian identity, and further compounded by the alterity resulting from claiming non-normative sexual identities in a societal context where phallogocentric heteronormativity remains entrenched. This leads to what Sandeep Roy terms "double minority" referring to community of queer Indian diasporas (qtd. in Mishra 68). Consequently, these doubly othered subjects face civil exclusion and abjection by mainstream India, as well as symbolic violence and censure from their own indigenous communities for contravening traditional mores. This liminal positioning leads to a sense that Bhabha terms 'unhomeliness,' where they feel perpetually like outsiders in both their supposed home and broader society. The contemporary literary and cultural narratives of Northeast India similarly overlook the experiences of queer individuals,

relegating their identities to silence and invisibility within the interstitial spaces of society.

This chapter focuses on the intricate terrain of gender politics and sexual identity, as encapsulated within the selected primary texts: *Seahorse, The Nine-chambered Heart*, and two short stories from *Boats on Land*. It comprehensively examines narrative elements that shed light on themes of belonging and alienation, particularly within the context of sexual minorities' struggles for recognition in political and cultural spheres. Employing insights from psychoanalysis, feminism, and queer theory, the chapter investigates the intricate process of the formation of sexual identity within the structure of a society. These selected narratives articulate themes of homosexuality and queerness, offering astute examinations of individuals negotiating their identities amidst the broader sociocultural landscape. By delving into postmodern sexual identity complexities, Pariat critically addresses the historical stigmatisation and marginalisation of non-normative desires. Her narratives contest prevailing cultural narratives that pathologise and marginalise Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer plus (LGBTQ+) individuals, thus fostering a broader understanding and celebration of diverse identities woven into our social fabric.

In *Seahorse*, Pariat constructs a narrative encompassing themes of love, loss, betrayal, and trauma within a society enforcing conformity. The novel delves into the complexities of these norms, highlighting power dynamics in relationships and the psychological toll of defying societal expectations. Pariat's narrative challenges fixed identities, presenting a fluid perspective on sexuality where desire transcends gender boundaries, mirroring the seahorse's innate versatility. The employment of the Poseidon and Pelops myth as a conceptual framework for Nem and Nicholas's relationship extends beyond allusion, embracing the seahorse as a potent symbol. This seahorse symbolises resilience, beauty, and queerness:

> Seahorses are strange creatures . . . . They mate for long, if not for life. . . . They belong to that rarest of fish families marked by male pregnancy.
>
> And, most marvellous of all, they dance . . . . They change colour. (*Seahorse* 114)

Pariat's exploration of individual identity underscores its flexibility and fluidity, positioning the queer body as a locus of resistance against heteronormative social norms. In this vein, Hostetler and Herdt elaborate on the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity, inviting scrutiny into the ontological underpinnings of "gay" and "lesbian" categorisations (252). They propose that "queer" denotes an inclusive, fluid, conceptual realm that challenges the "heteronormative and heterosexist" social order (253). This fluidity resonates in the text, exemplified as Nicholas observes the sculpture's malleable value and identity:

> This is how I looked at sculpture, as fundamentally social beings whose identities are not fixed once and for all at the moment of fabrication but are repeatedly made and remade through interactions with humans. Often, religious historians and art historians privilege the moment of an object's creation as the essential meaning of the object . . . but some of us hold that subsequent reinterpretations are equally important and equally worthy of enquiry. Would a person's biography be confined to an account of his or her birth? No. Objects come to be animated with new significance. (Pariat, *Seahorse* 160)

Nicholas' observation here resonates with Foucault's notion of "discursive" formations, encompassing language and knowledge systems that shape perceptions and understanding of the world. According to Foucault, meaning does not intrinsically reside within objects but emerges through ongoing interactions and interpretations (*The Archaeology* 48-49). Moreover, Nicholas' critique of the art and religious historians' emphasis on an object's inception underscores the influence of power dynamics on meaning construction.

Within a heteronormative society, behaviours deviating from established norms are swiftly stigmatised as shameful and disgraceful. Normative discourse perpetuates strict dichotomies between acceptable and deviant desires, marginalising those who exist beyond its confines. For instance, in the story "Boats on Land" two female protagonists liken their situation to "boats stranded on land," navigating heteronormative societal space awkwardly due to their perceived otherness ("Boats

on Land" 198). This otherness challenges normative discourse by disrupting claims of universality and exposing exclusionary practices bolstering its authoritative stance.

In the story, "Secret Corridors," the protagonist Natalie embarks on a compelling journey to connect with her schoolmates. This evocative account delves into the complex interaction between Natalie's sexuality and her self-awareness, revealing its profound influence on her identity (Goswami 29). Despite societal pressures, Natalie succeeds in forming a strong bond with another woman, navigating the hidden recesses of her emotions. Yet, the weight of societal norms casts a shadow, constraining her feelings for her classmate Iba within the realm of the forbidden. Society's strict censure of same-sex relationships obscures Natalie's truth, forcing it into secrecy and branding it as morally unacceptable.

In Pariat's fiction, same-sex relationships often embody therapeutic qualities and psychological fulfilment, while opposite-sex relationships often lead to despair and animosity. Characters like Nem, Nicholas, and unnamed female narrators defy societal norms without guilt, dismantling constraints imposed by religious and societal institutions. Their resilience challenges oppressive frameworks, opening alternative modes of existence. Pariat's characters offer emancipatory possibilities beyond conventional love and desire.

Pariat's narratives, thus, align with the postmodernist ethos by giving marginalised individuals a resounding voice, unveiling their hidden realities within the grand narratives of mainstream discourse. In *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, she employs a fragmented narrative, reflecting the fragmented nature of truth. Through the diverse viewpoints of nine characters, the novel resists a singular authoritative voice, embracing subjective perspectives. The fragmented structure thus echoes postmodern scepticism towards grand narratives, favouring a kaleidoscope of perspectives and multiple interpretations.

In *The Nine-Chambered Heart*, Pariat deliberately refrains from assigning names to characters, reflecting her rejection of a fixed identity constructed by conventional sexual categorisations. This concept is also reflected when the

protagonist defines an "artwork" to the narrator as something whose meaning is contingent upon individual perspectives, highlighting the subjective nature of interpretation:

> 'It is an artwork,' you tell me.
>
> 'Signifying what?'
>
> 'Whatever you wish it to.' Nowadays, you add, everything is non-essentialist. (*The Nine-Chambered Heart* 79)

This aligns with Butler's critique of identity labels and her embrace of performative gender concepts. Drawing from Derrida's philosophy, Butler challenges essentialist notions of gender and sexual identity. Her seminal work, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1991), questions identity categories like "lesbian" and "gay," viewing them as tools used by oppressive systems or as platforms for resistance against such systems (558). Butler argues that gender identity is separate from biological sex and challenges the idea that certain behaviours are exclusive to one sex. Her view of identities as performative, here, aligns with Derrida's concept of "freeplay," disrupting the naturalised link between sex and gender (Han 90). Additionally, gender as a copy without an original, combined with Butler's critique of foundational masculine/feminine traits, parallels Derrida's deconstruction of 'origins.' This questions the fixed essence of gender, exposing its constructed nature and emphasising its performative aspects.

## Chapter Five

## Violence and Identity: The Politics of Belonging and Unbelonging

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of select narratives from *Boats on Land*, delving into the intricate relationship between violence and identity. It focuses explicitly on the Khasi experiences within the broader context of the northeastern region, shedding light on identity formation and the complexities of belonging in Meghalaya's socio-political milieu. The examination highlights how Pariat's stories capture the post-statehood political tensions between the Khasis and non-Khasis (*dkhars* or outsiders) in Shillong.

Notably, the short stories “19/87” and “Laitlum” aptly portray divergent ideologies prevalent during Shillong’s tumultuous late 1980s and early 1990s. These ideologies encompass choices between endorsing violent ethnic nationalism and pursuing peaceful conflict resolution. “19/87” amplifies non-conformist and alternative perspectives on notions of belonging and indigeneity within a specific locale while also underlining marginalised expressions of dissent against the concept of cultural purity.

The narratives demonstrate the politicisation of the tribal-non-tribal dichotomy in Meghalaya, resulting in the portrayal of non-tribal groups as encroachers who impinge upon the economic and socio-political rights of the indigenous populace, thereby fuelling prolonged conflicts. In the context of Meghalaya and northeast India, the formation of new ethno-linguistic state has not fully resolved these tensions, as “non-ethnic polities” and “trans-ethnic clans” continue to exist within these geopolitical zones (Ramirez 94-6). Horowitz’s assertion that “ethnicity is often accompanied by hostility toward outgroups” (7) highlights that these non-tribal factions are often viewed as intruders or foreigners, contributing to the enduring disputes that have defined the area for the last forty years. In this context, the story “19/87” utilises the titular slash symbolically to explore the potential for connection with strangers. This challenges the prevalent assumption that strangers must be met with suspicion or hostility upon crossing societal boundaries. Pariat advocates for inclusivity, endorsing engagement with strangers rather than marginalisation or exclusion. As Mara Matta contends, this intimate portrayal of the outsider’s (Suleiman’s) life seeks to challenge the perception of the stranger as an enemy and, instead, proposes the notion of associating with the outsider as a friend. This narrative approach seeks to deconstruct the artificial construct of a singular Khasi identity, embracing a more multifaceted perspective (Matta 52-53).

In “19/87”, the protagonist, Suleiman, assumes the role of the ‘outsider/within,’ a concept advanced by Patricia Collins, revealing a nuanced and complex identity shaped by navigating societal norms while participating in their conventions. According to Collins, this “‘outsider within’ status has provided a

special standpoint on self, family, and society. . .” (14). Suleiman’s ability to navigate the complexities of his social environment and negotiate ethnic and religious boundaries highlights his adaptability and resilience. His identification as an ‘outsider/within’ and pursuit of cultural capital illuminate identity construction in stratified societies, accentuating cultural practices’ role in shaping social positioning.

As the plot develops, an unforeseen friendship grows between the protagonists, Suleiman and Banri. Yet, as the story unfolds against the backdrop of the 1987 riots, the complexity of their lives and friendship becomes apparent. Suleiman, an outsider Muslim tailor, and Banri, a Khasi tribal worker, hold differing social positions. Their friendship, however, exposes the limitations of fixed identity labels and the dangers of making assumptions based on race. This story emphasises the vital role of relationships in shaping identities, shedding light on how individual choices and societal structures intertwine to influence inter-group dynamics.

In the context of northeast India, minority groups perceived as non-threatening to the dominant majority are viewed as hindrances to sub-national ethnos and cultural purity. These ‘minority others’ are seen as an additional presence that does not conform to the cultural imagination of a homogeneous group upholding specific majoritarian ideas and cultural values. This growing hostility towards minority others is expressed through a “narcissistic process” in nationalism, as conceptualised by Arjun Appadurai. This involves the majority fearing becoming a minority while perceiving minorities as potential threats (Appadurai 51). Consequently, predatory identities arise, advocating for the elimination of other collectives for self-preservation.

In “Laitlum,” Pariat illustrates the Khasi people’s quest for safeguarding their cultural and territorial integrity, epitomised by the evocative title signifying their deep-rooted attachment to their ancestral homeland. This land holds profound significance, interweaving the Khasi people’s culture, identity, and history with its terrain. Politicians and communal groups exploit this attachment to incite the younger generation’s animosity towards immigrant intruders, resulting in inter-ethnic conflicts. Pariat’s scrutiny of self-identification within the Khasi community exposes

its pivotal role in demarcating their distinctiveness from non-indigenous counterparts. These demarcations delineate a power dynamic that empowers the Khasi people to assert dominance over minority non-indigenous factions. Additionally, the perpetuation of this dynamic often relies on cultural stereotypes rooted in ethnocentric biases.

In her other story, "Embassy," Pariat offers a profound and insightful portrayal of the lasting effects of historical traumas in post-colonial Meghalaya. Through the narratives of Mama Lang and Angel, she vividly portrays how power dynamics and tensions between the oppressor and the oppressed persist in everyday life. This is evident in Mama Lang's deep-rooted animosity towards the *dkhars* as encroachers and exploiters. In the story, Pariat challenges conventional notions of identity, belonging, and power by exposing the paradoxical nature of Mama Lang's experiences as both the oppressed and oppressor, the subaltern and the superior. While ethnic tensions may have somewhat subsided, the story reminds us of the ongoing need for caution among non-tribal residents, underscoring the enduring influence of personal traumas on individuals. By skillfully navigating contested social and cultural landscapes, Pariat illuminates the intricate interplay between personal and collective histories, foregrounding the profound impact of shared memories on identity formation. In this regard, the story serves as a compelling testament to the complex processes involved in shaping identities within such contested terrains.

## Chapter Six
## Conclusion

The concluding chapter sums up the analysis of the preceding chapters. Janice Pariat's literary corpus, thus, offers profound insights into the intricate dynamics and pluralistic dimensions underlying identity formation in a sociocultural context in general and Meghalaya in particular. Through nuanced portrayals of marginalised voices and exploration of liminal spaces, Pariat skillfully navigates the interstitial territories beyond fixed identity categorisations. Her narratives underscore

the fluid, heterogeneous, and multifaceted nature of identity, challenging essentialist views.

Pariat's incorporation of indigenous vernacular styles, cultural symbols, and oral traditions amounts to artistic appropriation and literary indigenisation — a potent postcolonial strategy. Her strategic use of postmodernist techniques like fragmented narration, shifting viewpoints, and open-endedness aligns with postmodern ethos, embracing multiplicity while resisting overarching narratives. Her deliberate embrace of ambiguity and unresolved elements captures the inherent instability in truth claims and systems of meaning-making. Her narratives on the Khasi-*dkhar* conflict in Meghalaya elucidate the role of violence in the construction of identity and vice versa.

Furthermore, Pariat's narratives empower the reconceptualisation of identity, sexuality, ethnicity, and belonging within expansive, inclusive frameworks. Foregrounding marginalised voices, her works underscore literature's capacity to confront boundaries, foster empathy, and illuminate overlooked perspectives. Her literary practice contributes significantly, revealing nuanced identity construction in fluid intercultural contexts defined by complex power dynamics and contentious histories.

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