ECHOES OF TIME: UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL MILIEU OF GARO LITERARY EXPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

The British colonization, partition of India during independence, rapid urbanization, and increased movement of people have led to the influx of migrant settlers from various cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds in Meghalaya. This has contributed to the city's evolution as a diverse hub of many cultures. However, the indigenous tribals of the state have exhibited a growing inclination to reject and marginalize non-tribal settlers through the promotion of a *sons of the soil* policy. Despite a higher rate of out-migration and a decrease in the proportion of non-tribal individuals in the state's population, there is a prevailing perception of increased in-migration, fueled by indigenous tribal groups and political parties. This perception leads to tensions surrounding the concepts of insider-outsider and belonging. Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow acknowledged the innate human need for a sense of belonging, but Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary's research significantly contributed to the theoretical understanding of the concept of belonging. The concept of 'belonging' has become a topic of interest and investigation in various fields of study. This study aims to examine the literary works to illustrate how the process of marginalization and the struggle for acceptance are manifested and encountered by non-indigenous residents.

Keywords: Marginalized communities, Cultural heritage, Tradition and innovation, Socio-cultural reflection, Narrative voices

Introduction

Meghalaya, located in India, is a diverse and dynamic blend of cultures, intimately shaped by the historical impact of British colonization and missionary efforts. In this varied terrain, notable populations include the Khasis, Jaintias, Garos, and other smaller indigenous tribes have peacefully lived, influencing the socio-cultural environment of the area. Nevertheless, the consequences of India's partition and the subsequent increase in urbanization initiated a distinct period characterized by the influx of migrant settlers from many minority communities. This transition has resulted in the emergence of an identity characterized by a division between "us" and "them," which has led to uneven power relations and created a context for intricate socio-political interactions. Although the state administration has placed significant importance on prioritizing local interests, this strategy has encountered difficulties, resulting in the occurrence of ethnic clashes. This research aims to investigate the concept of "othering" as shown in Garo literature, examining its intersection with the politics of belonging in the diverse environment of Meghalaya.

Objectives

1. To examine the factors contributing to the perception and its impact on Garo literature.
2. To analyze literary works to understand the experiences of marginalization and exploring the complexities of belonging and exclusion in a multicultural setting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in Northeast India are studying identity politics, focusing on the dynamics of inter-group connections and the phenomenon of othering, which has led to dichotomies like 'majority and minority'. This phenomenon is evident in the historical marginalization of people from the region due to their geographical location, often using derogatory terms and treating them as outsiders. Nira Yuval-Davis is a prominent researcher in the field of belonging, examining the dynamics of social group interactions and discerning the nuances between the experience of belonging and the resulting political implications.

> [b]elonging is not just about membership, rights, and duties […] Nor can it be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and destiny. Belonging is a deep emotional need of people. (Yuval-Davis, 2004, p. 215)

In the states of Northeast, there is a political practice of 'othering' where non-native settlers are marginalized, as seen in Meghalaya. The concept of the politics of belonging, as elucidated by Yuval-Davis (2011), demonstrates that belonging, whether on an individual or communal level, is always intertwined with power relations. Consequently, Walton and Cohen (2007) argued in their empirical investigation on belonging that marginalized groups have challenges related to social inclusion. Mukhim (2013) asserts that a small group of politicians propagated the notion of a *fear psychosis* where non-tribals unjustly claim land, employment opportunities, and relationships with women to gain political influence. Bakshi (2018) connects the *karma philosophy* to the concept of "cause and effect" and explains the shift in attitude by referencing historical accounts of non-tribal settlers exploiting the innocence and gullibility of the native tribal population.

Bhattacharya's 2015 book *Call Me* vividly conveys her affection for her homeland, while Kanungo's *Shillong-Shillong* depicts peculiar friendships between different communities. Samrat (2018) emphasizes that the distinction between belonging and not belonging was determined only by one's birth circumstances during that time period.

Research Gap

The research gap in this study is the lack of how the factors contributing to the perception and impact of Garo literature intersect and manifest within the specific context of Garo literature. Additionally, there is a need for a more comprehensive analysis of literary works to understand the experiences of marginalization and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the Garo community.

Discussion

The categorization of non-tribal individuals into insiders and outsiders is crucial in understanding their sense of belonging and identity. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, a prominent figure in Northeast poetry and a member of the Khasi tribe, expresses the Khasi people's concerns about the increasing presence of foreigners, which they view as a challenge to their unique identity and cultural heritage.

> "In the park I sawThose strange flowers again, That I have seen bossing around … Like flowers, only strangers, And strange ways have come. To bloom in this land" (Nongkynrih, 2011, pp. 6-7).

The Khasi tribe, particularly those from the Khasi tribe, are deeply concerned about the concept of othering, viewing non-tribal individuals as outsiders or expressing their anguish. Northeast poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih reflects these concerns in *Only Strange Flowers have Come to Bloom*. The large-scale migration of population from outside the region and the dependence on land and the State's livelihood have made the local population feel outnumbered and swamped by people of different cultural origins (Singh, 1996, p. 192).

> "They said long ago, let us settle and do business here. Warm, hospitable people and Endless avenues to lead to prosperity. Today, they say apprehensive stares have replaced the smiles And they claim to have diagnosed the disease. Fear Psychosis alas! " (Pyngrope, 2013, p.61)

This explores the marginalization of non-tribal migrants in the hills, who were once friendly to the native tribe people. They now feel marginalized by the indigenous community, leading to distrust and the process of otherizing them. Politicians have propagated the idea of a "fear psychosis" where non-tribals unjustly claim land, employment opportunities, and women for political gain. Bakshi (2018) explains the shift in attitude by referencing historical accounts of non-tribal settlers exploiting the native tribe people's innocence and lack of sophistication. Pyngrope provides justification for the indigenous tribe's position by highlighting the historical context and the impact of non-tribal settlers on the local population.

> "But wouldn't you suffer from this same malady, If you also belonged to a people who comprise A grain of rice, In a bagful of India, A grain that could simply slither away And be forgotten, Because they did not know it existed in the first place" (Pyngrope, p. 62).

Pyngrope highlights the marginalization of Northeast tribal communities in mainland India due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the region. Paul Lyngdoh's *To Whom it May Concern* highlights the perception of non-tribals about ethnic struggle and conflict, arguing that these issues are a violation of human rights. He raises doubts about the non-tribal community's ability to speak out against the marginalization by mainlanders, who are derogatorily referred to as *chinkis, immigrants,* and *wild tribals*. The lyrics also reference settler migrants who arrived in these hills for economic purposes and found the local tribal people welcoming and kind. Syiem's use of 'xenophobic wine' is relevant as he recognizes the xenophobic persecution of non-tribal settlers from 1979 to the late 1990s, which occurred over two decades (Sen, 2018, p.107)

> "While curiously blind, To our own decadence, excusing our politicians, For their predictable theatre of well-rehearsed lies And serpent-tongued promises" (Almond Syiem, 2020)

Syiem is a literature that highlights the Khasis' realization of being manipulated by politicians who exploited the native tribal population. These politicians engaged in corrupt practices and aligned with merchants who promoted harmful agricultural practices. The indigenous tribes have come to realize this fact, as evidenced by an article in a local newspaper (Mukhim, 2013). The severity of ethnic clashes decreased in 1979 and 1987, but the overall state of community relations became tainted with distrust and animosity. The emigration of the non-tribal population brought about a significant change, but it did not necessarily result in the decline of the 'sons of the land' movement. A notable development seen in the works of tribal poets is the emergence of discourse among indigenous tribal authors, artists, and intellectuals over the difference between insiders and outsiders. Poets like Ananya Guha, Nabanita Kanungo, and Purabi Bhattacharya, descendants of non-tribal settlers, depict the influence of their marginalized status on their feeling of belonging and address topics such as prejudice, injustice, death, and the erosion of humanity.

> "I'd rather die than see these hills decapitated they are cutting down forests suppose they behead these hills with their neat chop whom will I look up" (Guha, 2019, p. 108)

Non-tribal poets, especially younger ones, express the rejection of othering and the struggle for belonging. They question whether descendants of second and third-generation settlers should be labeled as outsiders. Young poets like Bhattacharya, Kanungo, and Samrat incorporate local culture into their works. The differentiation by the tribal community has historical and political importance, as indigenous people in Meghalaya view the categorization of non-indigenous settlers as "other" and the issue of belonging as a strategy to hinder settler colonialism and land dispossession.

Conclusion

In Meghalaya, the division between exclusion and belonging is a political and social issue, with writing seen as a rebellious and provocative endeavor. The insider-outsider syndrome revolves around accountability, equality, and the need to express oneself. The issues of otherisation and belongingness are complex, particularly in interactions between indigenous tribal tribes and colonial populations. The tribal community sees otherisation as crucial for safeguarding their identity, resources, and interests, while non-tribal settlers

feel deprived of their sense of belonging. Addressing this issue requires privileged populations to be more receptive and embrace an inclusive attitude towards indigenous tribal tribes.

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