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## Becoming an 'In/Outsider' in an 'Unhomely' World: A Reading of Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *The paper entitled "Becoming an 'In-Outsider' in an 'Unhomely' World: A Reading of Siddhartha Deb's The Point of Return" deals with the complexities of ethnic violence in Meghalaya post-independent India. The plight of the Bengalis who fled their previous homeland and settled in the new country is addressed. Even though they became citizens of the new Indian nation, they struggled to belong to their place of settlement.*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *The research methodology for this analysis is qualitative and based on textual examination of primary and secondary sources. It takes both the subjective approach as well as objective historical sources to interpret the text in the context of the spatio-temporal setting of events and places.*

**Outcome:** *There have been attempts to deconstruct binaries in postcolonial studies. Drawing from these postcolonial theorists, the paper attempts to deconstruct the insider-outsider dichotomy prevalent within India's Northeast, particularly in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. Instead of overtly demonstrating the fluidity of identities or essentialising a cosmopolitan outlook, the narrative situates itself within while at the same time deconstructing the binary of who belongs and who does not.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *The conundrum on the question of who is the real insider/outsider remains complex. In such a scenario, those migrants or refugees who find themselves belonging "neither here nor there," find themselves occupying a "third space." Their voices need to be heard and there is a need to be more open-minded so that a more inclusive society can be built.*

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Northeast Indian literature reflects a deep connection to the land, highlighting a key issue in the region's political landscape. Indigenous communities have adopted "territorial ethnicity," linking ethnic groups to specific geographic areas, a concept influenced by British colonial policies that fostered exclusivity (Weiner 1978). This has led to intensified conflicts between settlers and indigenous communities, exacerbated by nativist sentiments related to sovereignty and territorial primacy. Writers from the region cannot separate their work from its political context, as identity politics significantly influence the literature, even if it does not directly align with regional political forces. According to Amit Baishya and Rakhee Moral, the label of Northeast Literature has evolved to represent different sensibilities over various periods. The early post-colonial era focused on nation-building, ethnic violence, and the negotiation of a new Indian identity. Later authors, like Easterine Kire and Janice Parriat, have taken on the task of "decolonizing" the native mind by exploring indigenous culture. Meanwhile, the works of Siddhartha Deb, whose novel *The Point of Return* (2002) will be discussed in this paper, have redefined traditional Northeastern existence by introducing the doubly removed outsider, yearning for what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "third space" (Bhabha 50). The in-between space rejects the dominance of any single political or social perspective. It refers to a unique viewpoint that lets us observe the merging of cultures from an "interstitial perspective."

In "The Location of Culture," Bhabha discusses the concept of the "unhomely," which refers to the unsettling experience of having one's personal and political spheres intersect. This phenomenon involves traumatic ambivalences from personal history extending to broader political realities (Bhabha 15). Similarly, Jameson, in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," suggests that individual narratives inherently encompass the collective experience, highlighting how individual stories contribute to understanding the collective plight (Jameson 69). Essentially, both scholars emphasize the interconnectedness of personal and collective narratives in shaping broader societal dynamics. In *The Point of Return*, the personal experiences of Dr

Dam and his son, Babu, stemming from their status as migrated Bengalis, extend beyond the individual level to highlight broader social and political dynamics. Their encounters underscore the insider-outsider dichotomy and the tribal/non-tribal divide existing in Shillong, illustrating how personal narratives reflect and contribute to larger socio-political tensions.

In *The Point of Return*, Dr Dam is part of a cohort of Bengalis who relocated from Sylhet, Bangladesh, to India following the partition in 1947. Many of these migrants settled in the southern region of Assam, particularly in the town of Silchar, which shares close geographical and linguistic ties with Bangladesh. Additionally, some migrated individuals secured government positions in Shillong, the former capital of Assam. The novel illustrates how despite Bengalis settling in Shillong post-partition in 1947 and contributing to various government sectors, tribal communities were reluctant to accept them. Instead, they labelled the Bengalis as refugees and categorized them as “Dkhars” or foreigners, highlighting a societal resistance to integration and acceptance. The narrator encapsulates this dynamic by stating:

... forcing us to read the landscape of our everyday lives in terms of a new lexicon of outrage and fear sweeping through the town – strikes, demonstrations, public curfews, rallies, extortions, assault – dividing people into insiders and outsiders, laying down the rules of existence.  
(Deb 234)

The outsiders were not limited to the Bengali immigrants of 1947; they encompassed other non-tribals like the Nepalis, the Biharis etc. As they struggle to belong to their new place of settlement, the narrative presents how the characters try to grapple with their “outsiders” status to create their own identity.

Bhugra & Jones (2001) highlight the challenges faced by newly arrived immigrants, including isolation, exclusion, and the erosion of cultural identity during the assimilation process. They emphasize that assimilation often leads to the loss of connection to both one’s country of origin and adopted homeland due to cultural and linguistic disparities, employment difficulties, and housing challenges. These losses extend beyond physical displacement to include social

structures, language, attitudes, values, and support networks, leaving immigrants grappling with the dilemma of embracing their adopted country's customs while potentially abandoning their birthplace's cultural heritage. Papastergiadis (2013) discusses how struggles with assimilation and acculturation can lead to feelings of cultural displacement and alienation among immigrants, prompting them to reconsider their identity and social standing. This sense of alienation may cause immigrants to feel "unhomely," as described by Homi Bhabha (1994), distinct from homelessness. Tyson (2014) similarly suggests that immigrants become "psychological refugees" when they experience this sense of "unhomeliness," feeling estranged even within their own homes. These concepts highlight the psychological impact of failed assimilation and the broader implications for immigrants' cultural identities.

Bhabha (1994) contends that "unhomeliness" extends beyond physical displacement to encompass a cultural shift when individuals move from one culture to another. This concept reflects Ashcroft et al.'s (2004) findings, suggesting that migration involves more than just the dispersal of people; it raises fundamental questions of identity, home, and memory. In Deb's novel *The Point of Return*, depicting a Bengali Hindu family's migration from Bangladesh to India post-partition, the characters confront the challenge of losing their cultural identity while adopting the new place's identity during assimilation. Despite their attempts to integrate, they grapple with both physical and psychological "unhomeliness," experiencing profound frustration. Dr Dam's relentless effort to "put down roots" attests to his active engagement with the space and temporality he now inhabits. Deb's characterization of Dr Dam as a man of "stoic rationality" who "went on, absorbing the effects of the disruption into a ceaseless but unemotional routine" (Deb 8) portrays an immigrant's initial attempt to discard nostalgia. Dr Dam's attempt to shake off "the stigma of the refugee" (Deb 32) by focusing on the present moments can be read as a rejection of the cultural narratives that fix him against his past.

Nevertheless, Dr Dam strives to establish roots and build a home for himself and his family, echoing Simone Weil's assertion about the importance of

being rooted stating that it might be the most crucial yet often overlooked requirement of the human soul (Weil 56). Despite Dr Dam's efforts to settle down, his various job-related relocations prevent him from truly finding a sense of belonging. Ultimately, in Shillong, where he becomes the Director of the Veterinary department, he continues to feel the stigma of being a refugee. We also see his son, Babu, being a third-generation member of a migrant family, has a different idea of home than his father. He claims that he had long given up on the idea of having an ancestral hometown and that it had never come up in his life. He claims that he has travelled from one city to another. Throughout these movements, however, he remained restless and acknowledged that dismissing his home so quickly was impossible.

Babu acknowledges that he is unable to leave behind Shillong, even after moving to Delhi, where he claims to enjoy the anonymity the city offers. Though he had physically left behind the little hamlet of Shillong, he frequently visited his homeland mentally even before travelling back there after ten years. Babu ruminates mentally about his emotional connection with his hometown:

I return every day, sometimes under the cover of sleep, at other times stepping in the full daylight across the chicken's neck strip that divides where I am from where I was, when a certain smell or song or face emerges from the city's contested grounds. And almost always when it rains, lulling me into a reverie where I think I am back to the sound of horses' hooves drumming on the slanted, corrugated tin roof, gathering myself in the cold until the moment of awakening drenched in sweat, and the realisation of having been torn elsewhere from home long ago. (Deb 208)

This attachment to his childhood home can be understood from the fact that Babu's only home that he was aware of was Shillong, and during those times he was oblivious to the changing political landscape: "...by some undefined process, the 'we' became composed exclusively of non-tribals, and the tribal friends who had been a part of my life since the age of six faded away, joining groups of their own" (Deb 177). The narrator later recalls Adolf, the Student's Union meetings,

strikes, protests, public curfews, rallies, extortions, assaults, and the distinctions made between “outsiders” and “insiders,” “tribals” and “non-tribals.” He also remembers the requirement that “Bengalis carry identity cards at all times to prove that they are Indian citizens” (Deb 235). Posters warned non-tribal boys not to approach non-tribal girls, or measures against them would be implemented (Deb 238). Other times, the bigger issue was expressed in the language of the eviction: “Go back, foreign dogs. Go back Bangladeshis” (Deb 238).

Being a Bengali, Babu thus loses his right to name his birthplace his hometown and instead is treated as a foreigner. Having been labelled as an outsider in his own hometown, he is unsure about his present identity. Babu claims that he was shocked at how rapidly this peaceful and lovely valley became a battleground for divergent viewpoints:

...I went through periods of completely different emotions, oscillating between a desire to blend with the town and the insiders and a virulent hatred for a place and a desire to leave it for ever so that I would never hear that word, ‘Foreigner’, again. My father and I never spoke of the way things were, keeping our separate worlds to ourselves. (Deb 179)

Prior to this development, Dr Dam’s friends and colleagues had told him about the peaceful state of Shillong before it was embroiled in ethnic tension. They pointed out that the region was not fractured by ethnic divisions and insurgency. Dr Chatterjee, a long-time resident, said to him that there were no guerrilla groups, the land was cheap, the air clean, they had the best schools, and good hospitals and above all “there was amity between the tribal leaders and the immigrant settlers” (Deb 30). But soon things changed in the town as Shillong became the capital of a new hill state, Meghalaya, in 1972.

Compelled to embody the role of the “dkhar,” Babu constantly seeks an opportunity to flee while also striving for acceptance by the community he clandestinely resides in. Ultimately, he assimilates into the role of the invisible or scarcely visible “outsider/within” to navigate a space fraught with political violence. The concept of the “outsider/within,” coined by Patricia Collins to explore issues of gender and race, could be applied to analyze the dynamics of



insiders and outsiders within Khasi society as depicted in *The Point of Return*. Similar to the archetype of the outsider/within, who adheres to certain rules set by the insiders to gain the privilege of residing within this contested space, Babu assumes the identity of a stranger, restricting his interactions with the outside world to a minimum. In a town where being a non-tribal is perilous, Babu adapts to the situation by avoiding confrontation. He learns to avoid eye contact and feign ignorance when called a dkhar. Despite his fear, he adheres to the rule of not displaying it. Ironically, after ten years, his hometown remains entrenched in fear for him. While his father focuses on regaining strength after illness, Babu learns to navigate the town, constantly evading potential violence and fraught situations. Thus, placed in the position of the subaltern, devoid of agency or voice, he survives by traversing invisible paths and avoiding contact with the Khasis, who anticipate him living a separate existence.

As Rogers and Hoover, in their article “Outsiders/Within and In/Outsiders: Varieties of Multiculturalism,” have further expounded, individuals who perceive themselves as “outsider/within” may inadvertently reinforce the realities associated with outsiderhood within a particular organization (5). In this context, they are not suggesting a self-fulfilling prophecy (as outlined by Merton, 1949), where an individual’s expectations influence the likelihood of a certain event or outcome. Rather, the emphasis is on how our identities within particular social contexts govern our behaviour, which subsequently triggers certain reactions over others. This practice of alienation often fails to address the underlying conditions necessitating defence initially (Rogers and Hoover 5). Consequently, it may paradoxically be more effective to confront and challenge these conditions of enforced alienation. Rogers and Hoover propose abandoning the concept of “outsider/within” in favour of a more assertive figure: “the in/outsider.” The “in/outsider” is someone who acknowledges their subaltern condition but actively resists, aiming to alter their social positioning and transform the “outsider/within” into an individual who is within the organization but not entirely defined by it. We find this kind of transformation happening within the character of Dr Dam as discussed below.

Contrary to popular representations, the character of Dr Dam is portrayed as a man who is sacrificial, dedicated to his service, loyal to the government in all his affairs, scrupulous in his conscience against the corruption of misuse of money and power, and a man of vision who tried hard to uplift the common people's predicaments. There are instances such as—where he looked after his four siblings, three brothers and a sister, as though they were his children, himself being the eldest; he refused to be involved in bribery and even exposed corruption; he initiated the milk booth scheme to supply quality milk at a cheaper rate to the masses, etc. He is a character that debunks the stereotypical migrant as someone “evil and exploitative.” In actuality, Dr Dam is an apt example of an “ethnic outsider” who becomes the “ultimate insider” based solely on his profession of “providing a much needed service” rather than one who is seen as a “competition” (Srikanth 433).

Dr Chatterjee's emotional outrage about their abject condition strongly alludes to Dr Dam's character: “But somewhere, if people still believe in truth, it must be true that 50,000 people who fled in the night with bundles on their backs can't be all evil and exploitative. Somewhere, in some map, there must be a place for them too” (Deb 217). Furthermore, the narrator says about Dr Dam that:

He did not believe in these distinctions between people: tribals, non-tribals. He knew dozens of names, voices that reached him on the phone from distant mofussil towns, earnest and full of effort – Hussein, Marbaniang, Kharkhongor, Dhar – trying their best to immunize and administer. This was the real battlefield where the fight for a modern India was taking place. (Deb 65)

These lines are evocative of the notion that the propagation of the hills-valley divide based on tribal and non-tribals sabotages the “democratic and modern processes in the hills” (Singh, “Hills-Valley” n.p). Although N. Somorendro Singh's argument is in the context of Manipur, Deb's statement about Dr Dam's desire to look beyond the tribal/non-tribal binary asserts that such a perspective is required for a progressive society in modern times. Leapingstone's order against the new milk supply scheme initiated by Dr Dam and his colleagues demonstrates



the tribal leaders' aversion to change and progress when he says, "The new supply scheme will be scrapped. Do it the way it has been done all along" (Deb 69). It is only towards the end of the novel that minister Leapingstone's real motive is exposed which is to grab state power by appeasing a few people.

Though the contrast between the hills and the plains explicitly refers to a geographical divide, it also implicitly suggests the separation of different peoples who inhabit them. The mode of cataloguing between the various "hill-tribes" was classified by contrasting with the "plains people." For instance, Robert Reid in his article "The Excluded Areas of Assam," pronounced this classification overtly:

These areas which I have enumerated (Excluded Areas of Assam) differ markedly among themselves, but they have this one characteristic in common, that neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically have they any affinity with the people of the plains, or with the peoples of India proper. (19)

The distinction Reid made extended equally to the valley-dwellers of the frontier, despite the fact that he was comparing the "hill-tribes" with the plains inhabitants of "India proper." In colonial accounts, the "hill-tribes" were described more favourably than the "plains people":

[T]hey are in many ways, socially and physically, far above their Bengali neighbours of the plains; intercourse with them is, in consequence, much pleasanter, easier, and has far greater interest; innate honesty and truth in their manners of dealing often crop out, more especially in villages well within the hills, where contact with the people of the plains is of rare occurrence. (Godwin-Austen 122)

The racial tinge involved in such a colonial description is often mixed with "subjective personal remarks" like honesty, truthfulness, honour, loveable, and these characteristics "were employed in these classifications, which were then legitimised as scientific observations" (Jilangamba 284). It is against such stereotyping involved in the classification of the two binaries that Deb attempts to satirize in *The Point of Return*. In the section titled "History," Deb writes:

. . . in the inhabitation of the hills, Walters found a happy contrast to the dark, querulous population he presided over in the plains of Bengal as a judge. ‘Theft is unknown among them,’ he wrote, ‘and they are true to their word. In their moral character, they tower, like their mountains, over the natives of the plains.’ Why did they move, these natives of the plains, bringing their noxious, dark, sunburnt faces to blight these mountains? Did they not foresee what would happen when such opposites met, the cool and the hot, the light and the dark, the honest and the thieving? Why did they not know their history? (Deb 158)

A person’s sense of place attachment and identity, over time, is shaped by their environment and the people they associate with, regardless of whether they are native or non-native to that place (Hernández, Bernardo, et. al. 2007). This is highlighted through the perspectives of Dr Dam and Babu in the novel. Babu remarks: “How often had I compared settlements in the plains to my home town, weighed them with the hillman’s eyes and always found them wanting?” (Deb 191). He identifies himself more with the hill people than the people from the plains. The novel shows that the attributes of a good “moral character” do not necessarily depend on whether one belongs to the hills or the plains. Deb challenges stereotypes and prejudices that contribute to the exclusion of non-indigenous groups, emphasising the shared humanity that transcends cultural differences.

Deb problematizes the notion of “home” when he asks “Where could one go back to?” and “What had been left behind could not even be given a name” (Deb 178). As long as Dr Dam remains an object of contemplation within the space of the dominant ethnic cultural discourse, he is viewed as the victim of the racism of ethnic hegemonic culture which subjects him to stereotypical readings—the cultural other. At the same time, he is also the victim of his own group as the dominant Bengali community does not recognize them as equals. The narrator reflects:

Silchar was a small Bengali island in the state of Assam, heavily settled by immigrants from the villages of East Bengal who had brought with

them a sense of identity that allowed for neither growth nor change. They were defined not by what they were – that was uncertain — but by what they were not. They were Indians because they were not Bangladeshis, Hindus because they were not Muslims, Bengalis because they were not Assamese. They clung to their language fiercely, and yet they were not Bengali, because they spoke a dialect that aroused only amusement and derision in the real center of Bengali culture and identity, in Calcutta. (Deb 107)

The counter-narratives that underline this process of othering fall in line with Northeast India's reality where mainstream India often looks down upon the people from this region. Deb applies this form of narrative strategy to parody the official mainstream discourse by subverting the roles of the Self and the Other (Varghese, "Narrating India"). For instance, Dr Dam ponders the stark differences that exist among people because of their ethnicity:

There had been a time when ethnic differences had been unimportant, and when he thought about it, even now most of his tribal colleagues, were remarkably unprejudiced. If anything, it was his fellow Bengalis and other nontribal groups who were insular, with a vague sense of superiority over the tribal officers. (Deb 74)

The above comment made by Dr Dam regarding Bengalis' "sense of superiority over the tribal officers" highlights how the indigenous people frequently felt estranged and alienated in their own homeland. However, as the story progresses, the Bengalis are quickly demoted to the status of the Other, in the same way they had previously perceived the tribals. We comprehend that Dr Dam made this remark at an earlier point in time since the story is told in reverse chronological order. We further understand that the sense of solidarity gradually wore away with the passage of time as the nation's metanarrative imposed itself on the various states. Bengal was the British administrative centre up until 1911, and as a result, the colonised Bengalis, who adopted the full influence of Western education and cultural value systems during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed themselves to be superior to the rest of India. As Broomfield states:

a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment; keeping its distance from the masses by its acceptance of high-caste prescriptions and its commands of education; sharing a pride in its language, its literate culture and its history. (12-13)

Thus, a counter-discourse is created when the tribal people draw this gap between themselves and the immigrant Other to assert their sense of self, which had previously been erased in the official narrative of the Nation. By illustrating how the act of othering serves as the foundation for counter-narratives, Deb engages with the idea of authenticity to deconstruct the notions of Self/Other or Insider/Outsider.

In conclusion, as the idea of authenticity is contested based on ethnic or racial identity, we must move beyond questioning whose story is the most authentic and who qualifies as a true citizen. It is undoubtedly true that the Indigenous people in India's northeast find themselves as the "other" due to ignorance or outright discrimination from their mainland counterparts. Yet, the Bengalis, both the recent migrants and those who had settled a long time ago, are often relegated to the status of "double outsiders" as they belong neither to India nor their adopted place. In recent times, the concept of the nation has radically transformed, with previous national narratives being replaced by fragmented ones. Counter-narratives now actively challenge rigid notions of religion and race, the glorification of the nation as motherland or homeland, and clichés like "unity in diversity." While it may not be necessary to idealize these emerging, flexible narratives, their resistance to ideological and hegemonic frameworks must be acknowledged. Embracing these other minor narratives or marginal experiences is essential for creating a more inclusive world.

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