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Fault Lines and Fragile Friendships: Exploring the Concept of Nation, Boundaries, and Stories of War and Exile in Rita Choudhary's *Chinatown Days*

Sehnaz Hazarika

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Jamia Millia Islamia University,
New Delhi, India

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Abstract: Sahitya Academy Award winning writer Rita Choudhary's novel *Makam* depicts a heart wrenching personal tale of persecution, suffering, trauma, exile, and mass incarceration of Chinese Assamese diaspora under the Defence Act of India, 1962, during the Indo-Chinese War. The novel highlights the tragedies of the Chinese Assamese over the past two centuries depicting how they were brought to India by East India Company to work as Tea labourers on the Tea Plantation only to be later persecuted by the wrong Foreign Policy adopted by the Nehruvian Government. Thus, Paper is an attempt to analyse and re-examine the Nehruvian ideal of modern State and its foreign Policy which led to the dehumanisation and marginalisation of thousands of Chinese Assamese in their homeland. This paper also intends to focus on how this poignant chapter of Indian history has been relegated to the fringes and went undocumented, overlooked by historians and mainstream historiography, but kept alive in the living memories of people either directly or indirectly affected by the happenings. Thirdly, this paper will attempt to problematize the idea of Nation and Nationality, identity and boundaries, how international border politics in the macro level impacted interpersonal relationship of the Chinese Indians in the micro level. Lastly, this paper will examine the repercussions of Indo-Chinese War in the socio-economic and psychological aspect, primarily focusing on Women and Children.

Key words: Indo-Chinese War, Assamese Chinese, Identity, Exile, Displacement, Psychological Trauma.

Introduction

Robert Bruce's visit to Assam in 1822 and the discovery of tea plants native to the region led to the plantation of tea groves in Assam by the East India Company. The Singpho tribe residing in the Sadiya district of Assam called the tea plants *phalap* and had expertise in growing these tree plants. The Britishers decided to establish tea plantations on a large scale with the help of the Singphos and their success led to them challenging the



Chinese in the tea trade. During this period many Chinese people were brought to Assam by the Britishers to start tea gardens with the seeds and the expertise they brought with them from China. Some were indentured labors and other were slaves escaping cruel masters in search of a better life. Their skill at wood, iron and leather made them indispensable. These Chinese were later joined by bonded labourers from Central India on tea gardens. Eventually the two groups, working side by side assimilated with the Assamese culture as they sought solace in their backbreaking life as indentured labourers. Love sprang up between the members of the two communities, whose lives revolved around the tea gardens. Later they found love with local women, began to speak a lingo that was part Chinese, part Assamese. Finally, they settled in a small town in Upper Assam named Makum (Cheenapatti). Many years on, the Chinese not only survived the hard times, but they became a visible part of the Assamese community in Makum. Their children grew up with their Assamese counterparts without any thoughts about racial differences. The Chinese contributed to the economy by working as dentists, carpenters, canister-makers, lead-sheet makers and taking on trades and businesses in the town. Many people of Chinese origin owned food shops and shops that sold Chinese goods. Inter-marriages between Chinese and Assamese took place in course of time. Thus, in Assam, started a new chapter of history enveloping the seamless assimilation of the Chinese and Assamese to form the Sino-Assamese community who apart from the oriental looks and their adherence to some rituals and lifestyle markers consider themselves no different from any other Assamese person. (Rita Choudhary, p.25)

Even after independence, India and [People's Republic of China](#) enjoyed a period of friendly relationship, despite having unresolved border disputes in the areas of [NEFA](#) and [Aksai Chin](#). But the relationship deteriorated, however, after the construction of a Chinese highway in Aksai Chin in 1957, and India's support of the failed [1959 Tibetan uprising](#) against Chinese rule.(Calvin) . China refused to accept 'Mac Mohan Line' as a boundary and this claim and counter claim continued for more than three decades. The hostilities culminated in the brief 1962 [Sino-Indian War](#), resulting in a Chinese victory but no change in the effective boundary between the two countries. The fighting lasted from 10 October to 20 November 1962.^[4] On 21 November, China declared ceasefire and withdrew from NEFA, the larger of the two disputed territories, but kept the smaller Aksai Chin.(idib)



This hostility between India and China immensely affected the Chinese community in Assam . About 3,000 or so Assamese Chinese were rounded up under the Defense of India Act, 1962 and then deported to Deoli Camp in Rajasthan and Nagaon in Assam during the Sino-Indian war. They were branded as “enemies”, accused of acting as Chinese spies. (Abdi). Reportedly, close to one thousand migrants were forcibly expelled from the country and many others continued to languish in the Deoli Camp for several years, well after the war which lasted one month, had ended.

Rita Chowdhary’s *Chinatown Days* is against this background and goes back to a period before the rise of ethnic militant movements. During the Sino-Indian War the Nehruvian ideal of modern democratic Republic of India collapsed along with its doctrine of non-violence; its efforts to create a pan-Asian brotherhood under the umbrella of Panchsheel. The popular slogans of “*Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai*”, were turned into farce by the sudden blast of Mao Tse-tung’s dragon wind. Rita Chowdhary’s novel *Chinatown Days* reminds us of the climactic moment when the Chinese army is almost at the doorstep of Assam. The quavering voice of Prime Minister Nehru came over the radio waves: “We shall not accept any terms that they may offer, because they may think we are a little frightened by some setbacks. I want to make clear to all of you, and more especially to our countrymen in Assam, to whom my heart goes out at this moment. (Choudhary,p117)” It was an admission of failure that created deep fissures in the Indian psyche. To the Assamese people it seemed that they were being abandoned to their fate. As we know, the Chinese advance stopped as suddenly as it had started. Chowdhury’s protagonists, however the people living in Makam, the Chinese community and those with Assamese links found themselves suddenly viewed as enemies of the state. The dragon’s seed that had been scattered along Assam’s hillsides along with the tea bushes had grown teeth. The state-perpetrated persecution of Chinese Indians was authorized by the Defense of India Act, 1962. After the brief Sino- Indian War, India incarcerated thousands of Chinese-Indians in an interment camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, where they were held for years without trial. The last internees were not released until 1967. Thousands more Chinese-Indians were forcibly deported or coerced to leave India. Nearly all internees had their properties sold off or looted. Indian officials openly compare the internment of Chinese-Indians with the intermittent Japanese-American during WWII. This dehumanization and persecution of the Chinese diaspora in Assam highlights the pro mainstream ideology that rule policy makers of the Nehruvian govt and marks the failure of the state.



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When we come to the subject of war, conflict, and struggle in Indian literature the most prominent example that comes to mind is 'Partition literature'. 'Partition Literature' has contributed an extensive body of work to the mainstream Indian war literature but there is clearly an under-representation of several other struggles, conflicts, and wars that other parts of India faced during the colonial and post-colonial era, especially in the North-eastern region and how it impacted the socio-cultural and political fabric of North-East India. The British during their rule misinterpreted history and culture of the region and invented the myth of core-fringe conflict and that of isolation, which the Indian historians and ethnographers imitated and over-emphasized. The colonial historiography ignored age old links not only between the regions and rest of India, but also between hills and the plains of the region. In fact, our own historians Tapan Roy Chaudhary and Irfan Habib, did study the history of North-east India as a part of North -east India. Even they included the history of the medieval period of Assam as an appendix of The Cambridge History of India, vol.I(1982). (Kumar). Their blatant ignorance and irresponsible act become shocking when we find that a paper on the North East was categorized as non-Indian in a volume of the Indian History of Congress. (Kejarival). Only from the 1980's, the Subaltern presence has argued for micro-studies of local society viz-viz North-east India. In this paradigm, the agency for historical change remains with the small marginal communities. But with the immergence of cultural studies there has been a shift from focusing on the production of Knowledge and power where they offer a post-colonial critique of the documentation and published literature generated by colonial agencies. The challenge the very role of evidence. (Roy). Rita Choudhary's novel *Chinatown Days* is one such novel which focuses on one such subaltern history of Assam which has never made its way to the over emphasized and glorified colonial military history of India. No one knew about the existence of the Chinese Diaspora of Assam until this book was published. It rather came a 'shock' and 'revelation' to the rest of the world. Since the National/official history always focused on glorifying the idea of 'purity' and homogeneity' of Indians, the mixed-race Assamese Chinese and their elimination seemed like an act of purification of so called 'anti-nationals' and an insignificant episode in history. But Rita Chodudhary unearthed this forgotten history and interviewed hundreds of Assamese Chinese people and turned their story into a historical fiction. Choudhary has acknowledged that all her protagonists are from real life; she has not departed much from lived history in her depiction of people and their circumstances, especially so in her depiction of the victimization of an entire



community due to a wrong policy adopted by the Indian government in 1962. While dealing with the social aspects of war, the devastation of civil life and social security, loss of faith the writer also makes a strong pacifist statement blaming war and aggression directly for the life shattering course of events.

Rita Choudhary's *Chinatown Days* also throws light on national emergencies like Wars which exposes the fault lines between friendships of Nations as the slogan goes "Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai" and Nationalities and most importantly Identity.

The Assamese Chinese community who came as Indentured tea labors finally settled in Makum town which was called Cheenapati. Over the years they assimilated with their Assamese counterparts without any racial hatred or differences. They elaborately celebrated Chinese New Year and other festivals and include their Assamese neighbors and vice versa. Many of them fell in love and later married. Mei Lin and Pulok Baruah are one such couple, even though their marriage is opposed fiercely by Pulok's father. The Assamese Chinese also heavily contributed to the economy of the society, many were skilled in Carpentry and machine work.

As the impending war casts its destructive shadow, Chowdhury illustrates the gradual breakdown of this flourishing life through a brilliant narrative technique i.e.: by juxtaposing microcosmic event such football match or a school assembly where ominous dialogues are exchanged between members of the community against the macrocosmic event like ongoing Indo-Chinese war. One such instance is highlighted in chapter six of part two, the focus is on a local football match. 'Seven Star Club', the local football team from Makum, is winning against an opposing team. Their overall athletic superiority is resented by fans of the opposing club (a few Makum residents of Chinese descent play for the opposing club while a lot play for 'Seven Star'). Chowdhury intersperses the commentary on the match and the cheers of the audience with exchanges among unnamed fans like the following:

'It's very hard to win against Seven Star.'

'It's time to shut down that Chinese club.'

'They shouldn't have brought Hong and Ming. They are Chinese. Obviously they are beholden to their own people.'

'Hasn't Ming scored a goal? Don't talk nonsense.'

'I am not speaking nonsense. Tell me why Hong could not intercept the ball passed by Lee-sang?'



‘Keep quiet! They will hear us.’

‘Let them. What will they do? I get angry whenever I see the Chinese nowadays.’

‘What did they do?’

‘What have they done? Don’t you know what they done at the border? Just look at their faces. You know that they are happy when you look at them. Obviously! If they defeat us here today they will feel as if they have occupied India’ (211-12).

Thus, Choudhary has used the metaphor of ‘Sports’ as site of contestation against the larger backdrop of War.

The presence of Assamese Chinese community and their growing cultural hybridity in Assam, posed as a threat to the Assamese community and they felt the need to reassert the supremacy of Assamese identity among its political ideologies. Commenting on the emergence of this stark identity politics in the region, Nandana Dutta (2012) very interestingly states that ‘the presence of the stranger became the occasion for the construction of identities’ (Dutta 2012, 9). While Dutta’s statement foregrounds the irony of this political evolution, it also deeply engages with the Assam Movement (1979-1985) which demanded the deportation of illegal aliens or the racially other. (Baruah, 504)

The Chinese diaspora in Assam were very confident that their long years in India, which have Indianized them will largely offer them protection. In a humorous exchange, their unconcern is revealed in Ho Wang the butcher’s statement: “I don’t know how to read and write. I don’t even know where exactly China is. I sell pork in Makum market. Ask me the price of pork.”(p.186) Little do they suspect that they will soon become victims in the Indo-Chinese theatre of war and politics.

Sadly, these Assamese Chinese when deported to China, faced excruciating physical and mental torture. . For the Indian Chinese, “it was as though a ball of fire had suddenly dropped down from the moonlit sky into the courtyard.”(336). They were forced to work on farms, the people who led prosperous lives as skilled workers in Assam have to come to terms with the tough ways of the Chinese government. In China, they find more harshness as the local people hate them and consider them Indians, calling them land-grabbers. The great human tragedy is compounded by the fact that the Assamese spouses of Chinese men have accompanied their families on this journey. Chowdhury puts names and faces to the faceless people deported from India. In China, people are labelled ‘Chinese Indian’ and ‘Chinese Pakistani’. It is difficult not to feel alienated in their



new surroundings as the hostility of the local people breaks out in the form of open confrontation more than once in Maoist China. Both groups – the refugees and the locals – hate each other. The older ones die, one by one. But death is brought on by more than old age, it is brought on by the grief of being torn from loved ones whom they have no chance of ever seeing again. Choudhary novel thus highlights the futility of War where Identity becomes fluid, a construct and Nationality and boundaries becomes blurry and redundant.

Rita Choudhary's novel *Chinatown Days* throws a tragic light into the trials and tribulations of Assamese Chinese Women who were forced into exile and uprooted from their homes following the Indo-Chinese war, even pregnant ladies and Children were not spared. The novel highlights this specific trauma through its female protagonist, an Assamese-Chinese woman named Mei Lin who is taken away from her Assamese husband Pulok Baruah during the early stages of her pregnancy. The character of Mei Lin represents the plight of many such Assamese-Chinese women who were pregnant during the time the Indian government implemented this forced displacement and were separated from their Assamese family members merely based on race. Carpenter argues that women suffer the atrocities of war more than men not because of biological reason but "pre-existing gendered social structures."- For example, the extra burden of securing water, food, and wood for heating purposes, which comes on top of caring and nurturing their family, often falls on women and exposes them to many dangers. Thus, in societies where female discrimination is widespread even during peacetime, women will suffer particularly strongly from the destructive power of violent conflict. Mei Lin who was pregnant is shown as doubly marginalised, firstly as a woman and secondly as a pregnant woman whose marital status was subservient to her racial history. She was never accepted by Pulok's father which was highlighted by his absence in Pulok and Mei Lin's wedding rituals. Moreover, this novel also showcases the pathetic condition of the Deoli camp and the terrible train journey to the camp that the Chinese migrant had to endure. The extreme heat of Rajasthan, the scarcity of food and water, worst living condition of the camps stands as a testimony to the harsh condition that Chinese migrants were forced to deal with. This treatment inflicted on the Assamese Chinese seriously poses the question as to why the Indian government never offered any kind of health facilities and Sanitation and never had any medical record of pregnant women or any other diseases or death.



Mental health is an important facet of human capital with a significant impact on many aspects of human life. Yet, while the ‘tangible’ costs of wars through the impact on survivors are routinely assessed, evaluations of the psychological costs of wars, including those on mental health, are far scarce. Men, women, and children all experience acute trauma post conflict but to assume that the effects are homogenous across groups would be a flawed assessment. Women and children exposed to violence and brutalities of war are highly vulnerable to the effects of war causing severe psychological problems. Children for instance are in many ways dependent on adults for their survival needs, such as food and water, and child-parent separation is a real danger during situations of armed conflict. Implications of war and conflict, such as trauma and physical injury, can thus have a very long-term effect on their development and growth into adulthood (Dupuy & Peters).

Moreover, the novel effectively draws the melancholic life at the camp and captures its emotional trauma through the protagonist Mei Lin. “Chowdhury produces a sense of catharsis in the instance where Mei Lin writes letters to Pulok from the camp and endlessly waits for a response. The dichotomy of being a war refugee and being pregnant with a child with whose father she is unable to establish contact evidently puts her in a mentally taxing situation. Her shriveling body might also be a response to her mental trauma. The risk of such psychosocial factors affecting mental health during pregnancy and resulting in serious complications is commonly high among forced migrants and refugee” (Nayak, Baruah. 505)p

Rita Chowdhury as a storyteller brings the threads of many lives together and admirably weaves what Amitav Ghosh has called “a moving saga”. It is a story of human beings pulled asunder by history, racial hatred and wrongful policies adopted by the government which they never took accountability of. As many of the interviewees yearned for an apology from the Indian government which they never received. The haunting remnants of the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian war continue to threaten the Chinese minority in India and the Chinese-Indians who were forcefully deported and displaced to China. Many of them have moved on to other Western countries and have secured better lives but are still uncomfortable revisiting the tragedies they endured in India. Thus, Chinatown Dys stand as a testimony to human suffering and endurance which Chowdhury narrates with great sensitivity and scholarship.



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