

Locating the “Northeast”: Global, National, Regional and Local Novels of Siddhartha Deb, Mamang Dai and Anjum Hasan

Albeena Shakil

Fellow, IIAS

Well into the 1950s and 60s, literary critic K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar was still wondering whether “Indo-Anglian” literature, as it was called then, should be evaluated as “a minor tributary of English literature”¹ or as another tributary of Indian literature. By the 1970s, Meenakshi Mukherjee, another emerging stalwart, made a compelling case for evaluating “Indo-Anglian” novels not as part of the wider tradition of the English novel but independently as a “branch of Indian fiction”². Despite her proposition, by the 1990s, the gap between the Indian-English novel and the rest of *bhasha* literatures could not have been wider, with fierce debates over the “authenticity” of writing in English.

The Indian-English novel has come a long way since then, making forays into the domain of mass, popular or commercially successful literature, catering to the nascent literary appetites of the burgeoning new middle classes of India who aspire to be globalized but are often also not. The sustained courtship of the English language by Dalit scholars has also produced *The Gypsy Goddess* in 2014, the first major original novel in English by a Dalit author, Meena Kandasamy. During the same period, several English novelists from the Northeast have made significant impact, gaining readerships across India as well as abroad.

By now, writings from the Northeast have evolved as a distinct body of work. It must be clarified here that one employs the term Northeast with caution which, much like South Asia, also perhaps exists more elsewhere than within the region. However, this overall literary development begs several questions: whether English novelists from the Northeast are to be viewed as a tributary of Indian-English fiction or as part of Northeast fiction across its multiple languages and literary traditions; as part of the global body of Anglophone literatures or whether they stand independent and apart. And should a distinction be made between writings “from”

the Northeast and “of/about” the Northeast? One does not have straight answers to these questions but we all have the benefit of hindsight in related debates over the Indian-English novel.

The limited point that one seeks to make here is that Indian-English novels in contemporary India inhabit a considerably stratified terrain of the contemporary Indian middle classes’ imaginaries, extending from those who are at the cutting-edge of global capitalism in terms of lifestyle, culture, livelihood and theory, to first generation entrants. Emerging in this context, Indian-English novelists from the Northeast are very interesting as they are seeking to negotiate this entire range in their writings, wherein one end of the spectrum exists in acute awareness of the other, with the additional aspect of “Northeast” specificities.

Three novelists from the Northeast will be examined here, namely Mamang Dai, based in Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh; Anjum Hasan, from Shillong but based in Bangalore; and Siddhartha Deb, also from Shillong but based abroad in New York. Since it is virtually impossible to make any representative selection of novelists from the Northeast given the internal diversity of the region, the selection is based on the simple fact of the diversity of the current location of the chosen writers and the fact that they have written more than one novel in English.

Hailing from the Adi tribe, Mamang Dai has written three novels – *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009) and *The Black Hill* (2015). Anjum Hasan is a case of double migration, of her parents from Uttar Pradesh to Meghalaya, and then her own from Shillong to Bangalore. She also has three novels to her credit – *Lunatic in my Head* (2007), *Neti, Neti* (2009) and *The Cosmopolitans* (2015). Of Bengali origin, Siddhartha Deb too negotiates multiple migrations and alienation in his writings, of his parents in 1947 from the then East Bengal to what was still Assam, and his own from Shillong to Calcutta to Delhi to New

York. He has written two novels – *The Point of Return* (2003) and *An Outline of the Republic* also published as *Surface* (2007).

His first novel, *The Point of Return*, is about the futility of ever being able to have a homeland. Rejected by and rejecting his hometown, the nation, the Nehruvian state as well as his father, the novel is about the slow evolution of the dramatized young narrator, Babu, who is ultimately poised to become part of the global creed of exiles – people with histories but no homelands. Divided into four parts – arrival, departure, terminal and travelogue – his “local” novel maps the growing distance between Babu and his father, Dr Dam, a relic of the Nehruvian state, a dedicated government “servant”, a retired veterinary doctor, a 1947 Bengali refugee from East Pakistan who is still a “refugee” or “Dkhar” even in 1987 in the fictional town of Rilbong closely resembling Shillong. In this non-chronological historical novel with scant presence of the mother or the motherland, the young dramatized narrator asks – “One cannot be an exile in one’s own country, can one?”³ The answer lies embedded within the question. The post-national ideology of the author is evident:

It was not a question of roots or origin, you understand. That was not possible, not now, not fifty years after the notional ancestral village had ceded its place to the modern nation state. If we were all to do so, we whose lives are flung around in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, if we were to let loose our songliness, our routes of memory, our pilgrimage paths, we would find them faltering against the documents and borders and guns. Perhaps rightfully so; maybe this is the way it should be. One can cling too much to such things, like the followers of Godse, the man who killed Gandhi, who swear upon his ashes every year that the Indus and its tributaries must flow once again within the boundaries of India, that the crack of 1947 will be layered over again someday, but on their terms.⁴

Deb powerfully articulates the predicament of the region – “Each group has its own truth, but there is no way of putting them together to form a complete picture”⁵. Despite this observation, in his next novel, *An Outline of the Republic*, Deb did in fact try, more ambitiously, to map the whole of the northeast through a Bengali Sikh journalist’s journey by road from Kolkata into fictionalised Assam, Manipur and beyond into Burma in search of the truth behind a haunting photograph of a woman awaiting punishment by a Manipur based insurgent group, MORLS. The underwhelming novel, often compared to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, is notable for its attempt to unmask the quagmire of connivance and antagonisms between the army, intelligence agencies, state, politicians, insurgent groups, civil society, the press and the people. Without offering even a light at the end of the tunnel, this “regional” novel of Deb, going beyond

the ethnic particularity of its author, was lost in too many details, and gained much less appreciation compared to his earlier “local” novel. Based in and published from New York, Deb, despite acclaim, has been encountering trouble in carving out a *niche* within the literary world. His interview in 2010 was indicative:

In my second novel, published as *An Outline of the Republic*, I tried to go further with the foolishness of capturing the Northeast of India, this time by sending my protagonist on a journey that finally pushes him off the map and into a border town of Burma.

In both the first and the second novel I was very passionate about capturing a specific part of India. In some ways, that was a problem because I think it makes me an unclassifiable writer in the West, an un-Indian Indian writer because I don’t work with the accepted frames of India.

The next book which I have just finished, doesn’t have that problem. It’s a narrative nonfiction book, and it’s about a contemporary India that gets a lot of press, meaning this rapidly rising free market superpower, and this wonderful democracy that much of the West uses to contrast with the authoritarianism of China. It’s about the new shopping malls, the consumerist middle class, and the new rich.⁶

After his 2011 non-fiction work, *The Beautiful and the Damned: Life in the New India*, Deb has announced plans to write his next novel on New York. One knows that *Fury*, the New York novel of Salman Rushdie, is his worst reviewed till date and he has had to repeatedly return to back-stories from India, the subcontinent and Islam for his fiction. We also know that Jhumpa Lahiri, neither born nor resident of India, accosted with the hyphenated tag, Indian-American, has written two novels with the aid of history, memory, archive and travel about the India that she is supposed to belong to, but has now shifted base as well as language to write in Italian. It remains to be seen how Deb, writing locally, then regionally and then nationally, will fare with his next project.

Mamang Dai makes no claims to represent any category of people. And the subject of her writings is restricted mainly to the Adi tribe of Siang valley in Arunachal Pradesh. As the dramatized narrator of her first novel *The Legends of Pensam* observes: “It was important to record our stories. The old rhapsodies were a dying breed, and when they were gone, who would remember? What happens to people and the places we forget? Where do they go?”⁷ Dai has remained dedicated to preserving and transferring oral myths, stories, folklore in Adi into her writings. Her novel is about four generations of Adi men and women, their experiences, beliefs, superstitions, stories and histories in the village of its female narrator. The novel traverses the origin cave

of Keyum or nothingness to the Stillwell Road, extending into routes taken by Marco Polo and Ghenghis Khan, to the Lake of No Return, the arrival of the French priests, British surveyors and soldiers, rebellions, soldiers of the new rulers of India, the catastrophic earthquake of 1950, terrorist and insurgent camps, migration, cities, politics, gods and godmen, and the private histories of love, heartbreak, betrayal, death, illness, birth and old age.

It is interesting that the novel starts with the young Hoxo, the boy who fell from the sky to become the respected village chief, and ends with the grand old man enjoying time with his granddaughter. The narrative is also framed by the opening episode of the narrator escorting her friend Mona, of Arab-Greek extraction, editor of an international magazine – *Diary of the World* – that covers unusual true life stories, into her village by a helicopter, and ends with a pair of binoculars providing a vision out of the village into the forest, river, city and the globalized beyond. Despite the ravages of change, Dai's novel is not about loss. As Hoxo says – "We need courage and faith in the face of change. That is all we can do"⁸. Or, Rakut, another old man who believes that "if a person forgets, he loses his soul"⁹, and also says – "Why should we be afraid of change? ...Change is a wonderful thing"¹⁰. The perspective that drives all of Dai's novels is encapsulated in these words – "In this circle of hills, as in every corner of the world, all history is a history of connections"¹¹.

Her third novel, *The Black Hill*, is about a 19th century French Jesuit priest on a mission to trace an alternate route into Tibet, at a time when China was completely closed under the Manchu dynasty, crossing path with star-crossed lovers, Kajinsha, a warrior from the Mishmi tribe, and Gimur, from the Abor tribe. Respective individual characters in the novel are not yet aware of the historical import of their actions, but the novel is pregnant with meaning for the readers who have the benefit of hindsight. Dai received some criticism for her ambivalence towards colonialism in her novel, but her guiding philosophy remained that of tracing connections even in the face of violent encounters. Notable also was Dai's extreme caution while venturing from stories of one tribe to another, i.e. from Adi characters to Mishmi characters, or even while venturing from one village into another village.

Unlike Siddhartha Deb, who tried to frame the entire Northeast in his second novel within the region, Dai is more thoughtful in tracing this category elsewhere to Delhi. In her second novel, *Stupid Cupid*, her first person narrator, Adna, observes – "...for most of our history the different tribes had never even interacted with each other properly, even if they lived in the next valley. It was now that young people like Yoyo and Rita were meeting in

schools and colleges"¹². Remarking on this new feeling for "...fellow North-Easterners", she elaborates – "There were so many of us in the city now, from Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, from Arunachal, Assam, Manipur and Sikkim, and we mingled with others from every small town and settlement of the country"¹³. Subtle political commentary on the ramifications of changing stereotypes about the Northeast after AASU's 1980s talks in Delhi is accompanied by a critique of those stereotypes and perceptive discrimination. Treading a thin line in an almost risqué novel, Dai offers a critique also of what passes off as tradition and fate in the lives of women in her native village. Her three novels offer a double irony of vision, an inside-out as well as outside-in view, with central narrative figures who value the local but do not necessarily privilege it over the regional, national or global, ironically aware of the limitations of eulogising any.

Published in the same year as *Stupid Cupid*, Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti*, the negation of negation, offers a leaf out of the same book, albeit situated in Bangalore. It too is about a young migrant woman from the Northeast and her struggle with desire, romance, friendship and livelihood leading to shock and return followed by starting over in the city. Hasan's world is layered with diverse and fleshed-out characters with respective back stories, be it Naomi from America, Maya who seeks life abroad, Muku the distraught but tougher younger sister of Sophie, Swami, Sophie's lover who is completely unlike R.K. Narayan's Swami, Ringo Saar who, contrary to expectations, ends up committing murder, Chinnappa, the debt ridden vegetarian landlord, Shiva, the former classmate, god-man Baba Sampige, Uncle Rock of the Shillong Blues band, Ribor, the former Khasi love of Sophie, Shantha, the hardworking co-worker, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, millionaires, and so on. Unlike Dai however, Hasan's novel is not about seeking enduring connections beyond apparent differences, but about deep disconnections, unbridgeable gaps, and learning to adjust and endure.

The protagonist of *Neti, Neti*, Sophie Das, is one of the three main characters continuing from Hasan's first novel, *Lunatic in my Head*, where, as an eight year old, the child thought that "the nicest thing by far, even better than being adopted, would be if she could somehow turn into one of them, somehow become Khasi"¹⁴. Firdaus Ansari, the young English teacher in a Shillong college, Aman Moondy, an IAS aspirant more interested in music, and Sophie Das, are all considered "Dkhars" and completely at a loss to face the situation. Aman, for instance, "found it particularly hard to defend himself against racist attacks because he was never sure who he was defending – an encroacher, a permanent guest of the hills-people, or

someone who belonged here because he had never lived anywhere else? Which one of these? He didn't know"¹⁵.

Their directionless-ness however, amidst the simmering stagnation of Shillong town, is not very different from the experience of the Khasi boys. For instance:

Ribor knew of boys like him who had gone away only to sheepishly return, weakened by having to bear the weight of their strangeness and deal with everyone else's. He knew of others who had stuck it out, who had become doctors, engineers, preachers and actors. There were those who when they first reached Bombay, had shouted and wept at the sight of the sea. There were those who had married other women, who spoke their own language only on rare visits home, who lived as far away as Helsinki or Bern. But there were also those who would never leave, who, having read Shakespeare and trigonometry, and proudly worn a missionary school blazer, would go on to run a dusty wine shop that didn't sell wine, marry early, have too many children and die of drink.

This was the universe of choices open to Ribor. What was he going to do? Nobody knew for sure, least of all Ribor himself.¹⁶

Unlike Siddhartha Deb's more direct engagement with politics and insurgency, Hasan takes a more indirect approach. In the novel, the three characters finally make their respective peace with failures, frustrations and living in their hometown, but by the next novel, young Sophie breaks free only to discover the limitations and constraints of her newfound freedom in Bangalore.

It is in her third novel, *The Cosmopolitans*, that Hasan, as a more deliberate and accomplished writer, positions her protagonist, Qayenaat, a fifty-something single woman and art lover, into negotiating the challenging terrain of mainstream contemporary India. The first half of the novel involves the unremarkable Bangalore resident having to confront the arrival of the globally acclaimed sensation, artist Baban, an old friend. "Till three or four years ago, the artist was unheard of here; today, his moneyed fame ensured he was embraced as a native."¹⁷ The adjudication of his art installation, *Nostalgia*, and the surrounding paraphernalia, leads to catastrophe; and in the second half of the novel she escapes, to seek refuge ostensibly in pursuit of an elusive tribal dance form, to a fictional town named Simhal, located somewhere in the red corridor. Her confrontation with the "primitive" is no less unsettling. As the character of the King says to Qayenaat towards the end of their relationship – "It's hard work, being a modern Indian"¹⁸.

In this novel, Hasan evades the Northeast altogether, and lays claim to a more national urban middle class narrative. It is full of angst and deeply unsettling, not because of ethnic turmoil within the Northeast, but because of the sheer turmoil of negotiating and reconciling globalized cosmopolitanism with its intersections with

the "primitive" hinterlands. The killing of Nur Jahan, the harmless painter, for her "offensive" paintings, brings the danger closer home. In an interview about her book, Hasan explained:

Qayenaat, my heroine, is something of a Rip Van Winkle. She withdrew from the world late in the previous millennium and went to sleep in the house her father, a Nehruvian civil engineer, had built. When she wakes up she is in an unrecognisable, new, money-obsessed country, and this is what drives the action of the novel, her attempt to make sense of this feeling of estrangement.¹⁹

At the core of all of Hasan's novels are protagonists who lack any firm anchor in life in either identity, location, profession, relationship or ideology. Her restless and out-of-place characters just about manage to survive and sustain, but they are always on the verge of disaster, in a tenuous truce with threats looming just round the corner.

The three writers taken together are negotiating the intersectionalities of identity, globality, nation, region, migration and locality in very different ways in their novels. Mamang Dai is writing "from" the Northeast but mainly from the particularity of the Adi tribe. The Northeast exists for her only in her Delhi novel. Deb unsuccessfully sought the Northeast within the region in his second novel, but since being based abroad has had to confront the "nation" instead of the "region". And, starting from writing about Shillong, Anjum Hasan has moved on to writing the Bangalore novel and then a novel that evades the Northeast to go into another disturbed area of a tribal village in the red corridor to confront the unsettling realities for the thinking/intellectual middle class individual sandwiched between globalization and the hinterlands today. Writing "of", "from" and "by" the Northeast, the three novelists taken together pose challenges for conceptualizing the category of Northeast fiction in English from diverse perspectives.

NOTES

1. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985, 2011, p. 5.
2. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*, 1971, Delhi: Pencraft International, 2010, p. 33.
3. Siddhartha Deb, *The Point of Return*, New York: Picador, 2002, p. 295.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
6. Jeffrey Errington, "The Siddhartha Deb Interview", *The Quarterly Conversation*, December 6, 2010. DOI: <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-siddhartha-deb-interview>.
7. Mamang Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*, Penguin Books India, 2006. pp. 176-77.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

9. Ibid., p. 189.
10. Ibid., p. 190.
11. Ibid, p. 61.
12. Mamang Dai, *Stupid Cupid*, Penguin Books India, 2009, p. 88.
13. Ibid, p. 13.
14. Anjum Hasan, *Neti, Neti*, New Delhi: Indian Ink, 2009, p. 99.
15. Anjum Hasan, *Lunatic in my Head*, Penguin India, 2007, p. 37.
16. Ibid, p. 76.
17. Anjum Hasan, *The Cosmopolitans*, Penguin Books India, Hamish Hamilton, 2015, p. 5.
18. Ibid, p. 365.
19. <https://kitaab.org/2016/05/02/the-lounge-chair-interview-10-questions-with-anjum-hasan/>