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Migrancy and Memory in Siddhartha Deb's Novel *The Point of Return*

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I. Introduction

The Point of Return (2002) by Siddhartha Deb is set in the northeastern part of India, which has been considered one of the most conflict-ridden regions of India and South Asia. Numerous cultural groups, in different stages of development, and with relatively autonomous histories, are tied up in complex political organizations. Tensions between diverse ethnic and linguistic communities are quite rife here as they struggle for political space and identity. Deb's novel is a very sensitive and thoughtful study about one such instance of ethnic tensions—between the Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) and the Khasis in the state of Meghalaya. The novel traces the historical context of the conflicts and fractured relationship between the Khasis and non-Khasi people.

Unfortunately, these postcolonial conflicts, including various ethnic conflicts in Northeast India have not received the same level of attention, either in the media or in literature, as conflicts in regions like Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, or Syria. Insurgency and violence have rocked the region for a long time, and states like Manipur and Nagaland remain highly militarized where people live precarious lives under the shadows of the guns and bombs. Large-scale illegal migration from neighboring Bangladesh has further added to the sociopolitical unrest in the region. These problems have taken their toll on the psyche of the people as they carry a strong feeling of distrust against the center. The region remains, more or less, marginalized from mainland India which, they feel, has always regarded them as the "Other." Partition and repeated redrawing of boundaries due to ethnic claims for autonomy have contributed much to the volatile and often troubled sociopolitical matrix of the region.

On the other hand, there is not much writing on or from the Northeast dealing with such urgent contemporary issues. The nation-centric epic narratives written by writers like Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor have

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often failed to notice the micro-stories of the region and to take account of contemporary history-in-the-making. Postcolonial Indian English writers have sought to depict all of India and its vast history in epic scale. Indian English writing, from its infancy, has been preoccupied with representing the nation. This national dimension of Indian English writing is undoubtedly its most distinctive feature. The 1980s witnessed a boom in these nation-centric narratives or "nationsroman" (Joshi 260). Novels by writers such as Rushdie, I. Allan Sealy, Tharoor, Rohinton Mistry, Nayantara Sahgal, Mukul Kesavan, and others, even though highly critical of postcolonial nationalism and the idea of a singular, unitary nation, still evince, to various degrees, an interest in the idea and the structure of the national narrative. Largely revisionist in nature, the novels of the Rushdie-generation regarded the task of representing India and Indian history as a huge project.

Only very recently have English writings from the Northeast emerged, and these have helped put the region in the limelight. Unlike mainstream Indian English writings, the English fictional works from the Northeast show a keen sense of place or rootedness and always deal with the issues and problems most urgent and real to the region. The writings of Deb acquire significance in this context as they are timely and powerful attempts at representing the people of the Northeast. Both his novels *The Point of Return* and *Surface* (2005) are highly understated but insightful accounts of this troubled region. *The Point of Return* gives us a glimpse into the lives of people who get caught in the vortex of ethnic conflicts. This paper will examine the social and ontological experiences of the "outsiders" in the context of ethnic movements for political and cultural assertions. In this paper, we are going to examine Deb's debut novel *The Point of Return* and his engagement with issues like migrancy, displacement, cultural confrontation, and the exilic condition of Bengali immigrants in the Northeast. This novel also shows the painful process of cartographic reconfigurations of state boundaries along ethnic lines, and the resultant violence, uprootedness, alienation, and continued memory of loss. Consequently, the paper attempts to shed light on the interlinked issues of migration, boundaries, and home and belonging in relation to the workings of memory.

The setting of this partly autobiographical novel is an unnamed hill-town, presumably Shillong, a popular hill-station and the capital of the northeastern state of Meghalaya, where Deb was born. Deb's own parents and grandparents (like the Dam family in the novel) came to the hill-town in the then undivided state of Assam when forced out of what was to become East Pakistan after

the partition of India in 1947, and was later to become Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the migrancy theme and geographical settings in Deb's novel appear almost as an invitation to read it as an autobiographical text. Deb has said in an interview that as "a child of East Bengali migrants in the hill areas of the Northeast, I was distanced from the upper classes, from Calcutta, from my original homeland, and from the place we were living in" (qtd. in Bhatt 205). He spent his youth there before being compelled to leave it due to ethnic complications in the region. He has been a journalist with newspapers in Kolkata and New Delhi. He went to Columbia University, USA, on a fellowship to do his Ph.D., and has been living there for the last fourteen years. He was also a writer in residence at the New School, New York City. The experiences of forced migrations, multiple dislocations experienced, and the many journeys undertaken by his family and by himself have significantly contributed to Deb's literary performance. In the same interview referred to above, Deb admits to the personal element of his writings: "[T]hings were very precarious for me and my family in my youth, and writing was a way of understanding the things that were happening to me and to others around me […] Ideas of home and belonging are complicated, and much of my fiction explores these complications" (qtd. in Bhatt 201). Even in the guise of fictional imagination, the novel seems to have drawn a lot from Deb's own personal experiences. This paper argues that the novel not only depicts the situation of the Bengali migrant minority in the Northeast, but also deals with the physical distance and movement between places of origin and resettlement. At the same time, we will examine how Deb utilizes the mode of memory to tell his story of migrancy and trauma of loss and dislocation. In short, the paper makes an attempt to see how *The Point of Return* memorializes the anguish and plight of people forever rejected as "outsiders" by the national system as well as by smaller nationalities within the national system.

Ⅱ. Boundary, Ethnicity, and Migrancy

The ethnic relations are highly complicated in the Northeast. For a long time, many the ethnic groups in the Northeast have been fighting the Indian state in their quest for political autonomy. Ethnic groups, such as Naga, Mizo, Bodo, Khasi, and Kuki, are challenging the state-constructed definition of a nation, and seeking to construct new narratives of their nations based on

ethnicity and distinctive cultural moorings. The lingering sense of alienation felt by the people of the region from the rest of India due to geographical and historical factors, as well as dynamics of demographic shifts due to large-scale migrations from Bangladesh, are at the root of militant nationalism and ethnic assertions for political autonomy by the indigenous people of the Northeast. The ethnically oriented identitarian movements and maneuvers have resulted in spatial reorganizations of the region and also growing hostility among various tribes and communities. The issue of migrancy is dangerously caught up in the sociopolitical volatility in the Northeast as the local tribes have always regarded the successive waves of migration as posing threats to their cultures and economic resources. The hostility and anger for the outsiders were the strongest towards the Bengali migrants (both Hindu and Muslim) from erstwhile East Pakistan. This section of the paper charts these interrelated issues of ethnicity and migrancy, and the many boundaries, ethnic and cartographic, that dictate and determine the rootless and uncertain lives of the migrants in the Northeast. The section also attempts to examine, via a close reading of the text, the plights of the migrants when the pent-up anger and resentment of the local people towards the outsiders result in violent ethnic assertions.

The novel is about the Dam family and their many trials and tribulations in their adopted homeland. The story is narrated by Babu — the son of Dr. Dam. Babu's father was still a school student at the time of the partition. The novel tells two parallel stories — one is that of the older generation which suffered migration as well as life-long stigma of being an outsider in a land full of ethnic, cartographic, and religious boundaries. Dr. Dam is the representative figure of this generation. In his adopted homeland, he led a quiet, uneventful life working as a dedicated government officer for the betterment of the local people whom he served. But as the story unfolds, we come to admire, as does his son Babu, the life of Dr. Dam who has endured the many challenges with extraordinary stoicism and courage. On the other hand, the story is also about the post-partition generation who inherited the memory of their parents and grandparents, and had to negotiate their own sense of belonging and identity in the postcolonial nation-space. The experience of migrancy, the pain and the sadness, fears and anxieties, was different from the first generation to the second generation of migrants. Deb's novel reveals how the changing dynamics of regional ethnic relations and sociopolitical ethos in the country determined the ways in which each generation of migrants had to negotiate their precarious existence and experience the sadness and stigma of migrancy.

The narrator's parents and grandparents fled the terrible violence of the partition of India in 1947, and entered Assam, the eastern side of India. Later Dr. Dam joins the Indian Administrative Service, and serves in the veterinary department in the hill-town where he resides. Dr. Dam, groomed by the nationalism of the Indian freedom struggle and the legacy of the British colonial rule, serves with exemplary dedication and honesty. His idealism and belief in Indian nationalism and the national system are shown to be in sharp contrast to the belief-systems of his son. Babu's dissociation from his parents' nationalistic idealism is natural because he was growing up at a time when the democratic ethos of the country was in serious crisis. Babu is a child of the post-Independent and post-Nehruvite era, a time when the utopian hopes and promises of anti-colonial nationalism were gradually collapsing under the evils of corruption, growing forces of communalism, power-hungry politics, and ethnic/linguistic divides among the populace. It was also the time when sub-nationalist assertions from various marginalized tribes and communities in the Northeast were turning violent, and the demands for autonomy to downright cessation were voiced from many quarters in the region.

In the novel, we see the Dam family moving from place to place, trying to take root and build a home. But though they carry traces of these diverse places, they remain rootless, ever carrying the burden of their migrancy. Deb's novel shares a lot of similarities with Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). The unstable narrative voice of Babu, like the unnamed narrator in Ghosh's novel, relies heavily on the resources and vocabulary of memory to reconstruct or make sense of the past. Like Ghosh's novel, *The Point of Return* deals with the Bengali people torn apart by the partition of the sub-continent. At the same time, Deb's novel, like Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, exposes the arbitrariness of borders and boundaries in the construction of the nation. Like *The Shadow Lines*, this novel also revolves around the closely interlinked tropes of migrancy, maps, and memory. But the exilic condition of the migrant in Deb's novel arises not just out of partition and arbitrary boundaries but also out of the sub-nationalist, militant ethnic assertions by a tribal people in a state within the republic—the undivided state of Assam. In the novel, Deb reveals "the manner in which a nation formed on a makeshift operating table can continue to redefine itself through the enforcement of fresh boundaries, internal as well as external" (qtd. in Pisharoty).

The Dam family had lived among the local Khasi people in Shillong since 1947. But their life in the hill station and their relationship with the local

people had always been precarious. Things became hostile as the state was again breaking up and new boundaries were drawn to create the new state of Meghalaya from Assam. For the grandparents, who had escaped the terrible ordeal of the partition, the geographical and now these geopolitical shifts meant nothing nearly so much as it did for Dr. Dam and his son Babu in the later years:

> The burden of the partition, of finding a new way of life in the country that had been fashioned so bloodily in 1947, he had left to his eldest son, my father. My grandfather's references to the home left behind as East Pakistan, decades after East Pakistan had seceded from Pakistan to become the independent nation-state of Bangladesh, revealed something more than a limited grasp of geopolitical shifts. It showed that the landscape of his past would for ever be permanent and unchanging, not something that was historical and therefore open to perpetual revision but a place beyond the vagaries of time. (26)

But Dr. Dam was well aware of these shifts, when during a night in 1971, alone in a bungalow, he read the news of the war between India and Pakistan in his former home, East Pakistan, a war that would give birth to the new nation Bangladesh:

> [H]e had become emotional at the thought of a war machine moving towards a land that for all the liberation to come would never again be home […] those place names that had been left behind the border of '47 […] Irrevocably gone, like the matriculation certificate he never claimed because he did not have the required fee? (110–11)

Deb shows the ethnic fault-lines that have always remained between the hill tribes and the non-tribals in the state of Meghalaya. Dr. Dam could never own or build a house of his own in Shillong because Meghalaya's "protective discrimination act" prohibits "outsiders" from owning or buying property there. The hill region witnessed ethnic tensions in the 1970s when the local hill people started to become aggressive in their demand for new laws protecting their rights over land and resources from outsiders and settlers. The growing awareness that their concerns have been, for a long time, ignored by the central administration constitutes the politicization that fuelled the dormant feeling

that they have been colonized and marginalized by the Indian nation-state. The movement of self-assertion soon turned violent as the demand for a new state and expulsion of all "outsiders" — Bengalis, Assamese, and Nepali — grew stronger. The so-called anti-*dkhar* — foreign dogs — riots continued well into the 1980s, forcing these people to leave Shillong and disperse to other states.

Widespread rioting and killings took place in 1979, and migrant Bengalis were especially targeted. The state had been partitioned into tribal regions, with special quotas set for the native races of the hills. As Meghalaya was emerging as a new tribal state, higher taxes were demanded of the non-tribal businessmen, the proposed railway line to the state was rejected because it would only bring in more migrants, and the demand was made "that Bengalis carry identity cards at all times to prove that they were Indian citizens" (176). Babu experiences the ethnic tensions in his own ways as the town, his home, the "confluence of childhood hopes and a faith in the future" (187), turned into a place of fear and menace.

During this time of ethnic tensions and tribal students' movements, Dr. Dam and Babu had to endure ethnic hatred and unprovoked assault from the tribal people in the very town that had been their home until then. During the high time of violence, strikes, and paranoia, the non-tribal people, especially the Bengalis, were compelled "to read the landscape of our everyday lives in terms of a new lexicon of outrage and fear sweeping through the town […] dividing people into insiders and outsiders, laying down the rules of existence" (175–76). Babu, for whom the town was the only home he ever knew, could not understand how people got suddenly divided into "us" and "them," how in the very town they called home, they came to be called "Dkhar":

> What this meant was that by some undefined process, the 'we' became composed exclusively of non-tribals, and the tribals who had been part of my life since the age of six faded away, joining groups of their own. (177)

The local Khasi people wanted them to go back, calling them Bangladeshis. But where could they possibly go? For "What had been left behind could not even be given a name" (178), as new boundaries and new nations emerged where once "home" was. The violence inflicted on the migrants and non-tribals by the local people is occasioned because of the contested issue of the place and the cartography of the place. Dr. Dam is paralyzed after being assaulted by a mob during times of troubles. Borders of the nation are created

to make a sharp distinction between "outsiders" and "insiders." Partition of the subcontinent is a stark reminder of the brutality and violence that sometimes accompany border-constructions between countries. Deb's novel memorably depicts the paranoia, violence, and upheavals in the lives of the people when the cartography of a place within the country is re-configured.

A large body of literary writings, both in vernacular languages and in English, has emerged dealing with the partition and its unspeakable horror and trauma. The historical documentation and literary representation of the partition are, of course, heavily tilted to the Punjab side. Historians and writers have written extensively about the human tragedy and the bestial and brutal riots and bloodshed involving the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikh communities. As a consequence, partition of the subcontinent is often thought of as an event that affected only these communities. The fact that the eastern side of India also experienced (and continues to do so) the trauma of the partition, is often ignored. Novels like Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Deb's *The Point of Return* are among the few literary texts that deal with the partition of the eastern side of the subcontinent. Deb's novel shows that in the eastern side, the partition involved communities other than Hindus and Muslims, in other different ways. Anindita Dasgupta reminds us that once we turn our attention to the northeastern part of India, the partition of the subcontinent clearly cannot simply be understood only as a Hindu-Muslim problem. Her scholarly works on the narratives of Sylheti partition migrants reveal that many of the post-partition riots in the Northeast were more a result of "the rivalry between Assamese and Bengali middle-classes in colonial Assam than that between Hindus and Muslims of the colonial province" (345). In these parts of India, the partition was an event that involved not just Hindus and Muslims, but extended to and entangled with local ethnic issues. Amit Baishya says that *The Point of Return* reveals that the transition from a "Hindu" to an "Indian" identity in the eastern borderland region often came into conflict with local rivalries and issues that fractured the assumed seamlessness of the movement into the "national order of things." Even citizen subjects who were supposedly mapped demographically into the national system as Bengali Hindus could become "outsiders" overnight as new battle-lines between "insiders" and "outsiders" were (re)drawn in particular locales in post-colonial India: "*The Point of Return* powerfully illustrates the progression of post-partition Hindu Bengali refugees from Refugee-Indian, Indian-not-Refugee, not-Indian-not-Refugee to Indian-but-always-Refugee through the characterization of Dr.

Dam" (Baishya 261).

The fact that paranoia was very much a part of the India he served so eagerly was first realized by Dr. Dam when the two Danish professors who had come to the town to inspect the Indo-Danish Dairy Project were suspected of being spies. Later, during the time of turbulence in the hills, he once again realized that

> the nation he imagined being shored up through the efforts of people like him was ultimately a fortress, that everywhere around him new battle lines were being drawn and fresh groups of people were being defined as outsiders, borders bristling with barbed-wire teeth. (221)

Deb's novel, thus, engages itself with the liminal subjectivity of the Bengali Hindu migrant/refugee in postcolonial India. This liminality is opposite to what a state-recognized citizenship denotes. For Bengali Hindus, India was the natural choice as the adopted homeland. But, as the novel depicts, many of these migrants could never become full-fledged citizens in the new country. The stories of these migrants/refugees of the partition remain, more or less, untold in large national histories as these people were assumed to be incorporated in the institutional order of the nation-state. The liminality of Bengali migrants like Dr. Dam may not be as absolute or hopeless as that of today's refugees of Syria and Iraq. Nonetheless, the figure of Dr. Dam "internalizes certain aspects of the modes of being-in-the-world encompassed by the figure of the refugee" (Baishya 239). Deb says that one cannot be an exile in one's own country, but becomes one due to a trick of the map. The logic of nationalism and ethnic boundaries dictates that some people remain unmapped in the demographic space of postcolonial India.

Ⅲ. Archaeology of Memory

To tell this story about partition, ethnic crisis, displacement, and migrancy, Deb shuns conventional mimesis and utilizes memory as the vehicle of the story. Deb adopts a linear but backward chronology and uses both first person and third person narratives. Babu grapples with chaotic and incomplete memories as he tries to reconstruct the past in his backward journey into time. He says: "I assemble maps, photographs and words, call on memory to furnish details that

will impart some sense where I lived, something beyond a dim comprehension of remote beauty and even more remote violence" (160).

The story that Babu chooses to tell bears witness of the plight of the Bengali refugee/migrant people in postcolonial India. Kali Tal suggests in *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) that there is a "universal drive to testify" (120), "to bear the tale" (121). In his own words, Babu returns as a "teller of tales, the inept archaeologist of memories" (186). Like an archaelogist digging through the ruins of the past, he goes on excavating through memories. Babu's act of memorialization also deals with notions of exile, belonging, home, and the crossing of boundaries:

> Perhaps this is the true return, the completion of a cycle set in motion long ago, and if it seems lonely, maybe it is because migration is a reductive evolutionary principle where the sprawling, oppressive family gives way to its streamlined nuclear descendant, to be replaced finally by the individual straining at the limits of memory. (165)

Memory is Babu's only aid in his attempt to make sense of the past, the violence, loss, and fracture, and also his father's quiet but extraordinary life and their own precarious place and identity in the map. During his journey into his family's past, Babu learns of his father's life-long fear and trauma of being assaulted by the local people of the town. Dr. Dam has always been tormented by the fear and uncertainty of that night in 1971, when, alone in a bungalow, he reads news of war in Bangladesh and xenophobic sentiment growing in the hill-state: "Many years later, in a sudden burst of confidence, he will tell his son, 'Boots, marching up and down, that night' handing over his memory of that fear and uncertainty" (112) to the next generation.

Babu carries the inherited sense of loss and confusion born out of historical displacement, and in this regard, I argue that this text, as memory-work, deals with what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory." According to Hirsch, "[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated" (*Family Frames* 22). Postmemory, which is deeply linked to historical and cultural trauma, may relay this trauma to later generations. In "Generation of Postmemory," she says that even if the later generation has never directly experienced the actual historical trauma firsthand, postmemory cultivates a sense of "living connection with the

past" (104) between generations. Thus, Hirsch says, the trauma of the past generation gets effectively transmitted to the later generations through family stories, historical archives, letters, diaries, songs, and photographic images, all of which articulate a "space of remembrance" among generations. Though not the same as memory or recall, postmemory, Hirsch maintains, takes on the structure of memory in the way in which later generations come to "remember" the past ("Generation of Postmemory" 106–07). Hirsch calls this action of postmemory a "retrospective witnessing by adoption," and she goes on to say:

> It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story. It is a question, more specifically, of an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted other for which postmemory can serve as a model: as I can "remember" my parents' memories, I can also "remember" the suffering of others. ("Surviving Images" 10–11)

Babu had had a strained relationship with his father and lived for years without knowing him or the turmoil and trauma that his parents had to go through. Their relationship and its gradual coming to terms are shaped by ties of violence. In the process, he also comes to understand the story of the Bengalis who, in the words of a character in the novel, "have suffered once from one of the cruelest jokes in history, only to suffer again" (215). Dr. Dam and his family carried this chaos of History and his son Babu carried it, too. He carries the memories of his lost childhood, the happy days, and the memories of ethnic violence and dislocation. But his memories are inextricably linked with the memories of the earlier generation—the inherited memory of dislocation, migrancy, and fear. He might not have given much thought to these past histories in his young, carefree days, but he later learns to understand the plight and stoicism of his father as he journeys into the past. The painful history of the past gradually becomes a part of him as he begins to understand and empathize with the plight of his father's generation. He understands that it is a history that he cannot turn away from.

Thus, while the trajectories of history and circumstances force the Dam family to move, spatially and physically, from one place to another, we see memories also traveling from one generation to another. There is a close connection of the tropes of travel and memory in the novel. The various

comings and goings and journeys, both physical and psychological, shed important light on the history and pain of migrancy, ideas of home and belonging, and in the workings of memory itself. Not surprisingly, the tropes of travel and movement appear in a big way in *The Point of Return*. Deb's novel is structured like a travelogue—its four main sections are called "Arrival," "Departure," "Terminal," and "Travelogue"—and the narrative travels across both time and place as Babu narrates the many journeys undertaken by his father in search of a place for settling down and his own travels away from his hometown and back.

The novel begins in the 1980s, when as a grown up man, Babu returns to the hill-town in the hope of finding some meaning among the ruins of the past, and it ends with Babu leaving the town almost in a hurry. In between these two journeys, we have other journeys—both physical and mnemonic. In the section titled "Highway Journey: 1984," the writer describes the long journey of Dr. Dam from the hill-town to Silchar in a truck carrying materials for the building of his house there. Babu, who was a school-boy then, wanted to accompany his father on this journey, and he was quite excited about the trip because he "wanted to photograph the bridge and the shrine, the lime trees that appear in thick bunches on the hillside, the plains of Bangladesh that seem faraway and mysterious from the road" (41) at the border of the hill-state and Assam. But Babu could not go because Dr. Dam had to give a ride to a policeman in the truck in the last moment. It was suggested by one of Dr. Dam's friends that it was a good idea to take the policeman along as he might be useful in getting through the custom post. This journey, for Babu, simply meant an adventure; but for Dr. Dam this journey was one of the many painful events related to his failed attempts of building a house and finding a steady center in life.

In another chapter "Night Journey: 1988," Deb gives us another glimpse into the sense of fear that people like Dr. Dam continued to feel as he travelled through different parts of the Northeast as a government official. The names of places like Aizawl, Kohima, Dimapur, and more held special allure to Babu who used to dream of travelling to these places in the region. Babu's innocence is offset by his father's account of these places as full of ethnic conflicts and militancy, places with "checkpoints bristling with machine guns" (145). Babu himself later travels down some parts of these roads as his family leaves for the plains of Assam for good. Only then does he realize the meaning of losing one's home and becoming an exile. Babu's present, ironically, seeps into the past of

his father's experience of migration during this journey.

The notion of an ancestral village was "quaint and distant" (178) for Babu for a long time, and his father's experience of being uprooted and rendered homeless had little or no meaning to him. Babu used to think that his world was different from that of his father's. He thought the town would always be safe for him because it was "home." He could not understand the fear and alienation of being a migrant in another country. He later finds out how illusory his idea of "hometown" was when he and a friend are assaulted (as was his father in an earlier incident). He experiences the same xenophobic rage, hatred, and violence that his father had experienced a generation earlier in East Pakistan. At the height of the ethnic turmoil, the family leaves the hill-town, and after many years, when both his parents are dead, Babu comes back and sets out on an odyssey through his memories, in an effort to find his *home* and to make sense of the past.

As a carrier of memory, Babu carries not only his own load of memories but also postmemories. He reads his father's diary, listens to the incidents and events related to his father's life from the family friend Dr. Chatterjee, and begins to understand the stoic, dedicated, idealistic, and sadly rootless life his father used to live. He uses the third person to tell the story of his father's journeys and his desire for a home, and we see a profound sense of empathy with the plight of his father and that generation. Babu's own later journeys from and to his former "home" and his final departure from it are imbued with the same sense of sadness, longing, and irrevocable loss of an earlier, more traumatic travel that he seeks to memorialize and understand. Only towards the end of the novel does Babu fully realize that his own life was destined to experience the sadness of loss and migrancy that his ancestors had experienced earlier: "I suppose my father's first visit to this town prefigured everything that came after" (219).

Babu also understands in later years the occasional bouts of longing for the lost ancestral place that his father must have felt. He describes his father's journey from Pandua Hills in Sylhet, their arrival in Shillong, his father's sense of wonder at seeing the beautiful place, the old town and its quaint, lazy way of life before his birth, his father's hard work, lonely travels, and postings, his suffering at the hands of a corrupt government, and other such things. Travel and memory are thus constantly intertwined in the novel. But all of these are not Babu's actual memories. Babu himself confesses that most of it is "conjecture" on his part (221). This is the working of postmemory as Babu

tries to *re-member* the past, the past that lies beyond even the grasp of his memory: "What went before, in the years other than those spent here, I don't know. There are only images in my mind, a scrap of scenes to be wrested free somehow, to be retained against the excesses of history, of time" (222–23).

In the third section of the novel, "Terminal," Deb insists that out of this historical amnesia, something can still be reclaimed. To Dori Laub's assertion about Holocaust survivors, "there is in each survivor an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come *know* one's story" (77), we can draw the parallel with Babu's narrative mission. He says that the migrant is not as cut off as might appear, especially the migrant who is also a writer. Through the act of recalling and narrating his hometown in the novel, he can say, "I truly become my place. I am my own hometown" (154). In the final section of the novel, "Travelogue," Deb further emphasizes the power of narrative and memory in reinscribing whatever is lost to the vision of history and time. Deb reveals in this section the constructedness of what has preceded as Babu contemplates his role as author and the problems he has faced in writing the story of his father. We also see the narrative shift from third to first person:

> Perhaps it is the biographer who is at fault. You will notice that I find it impossible to say anything of his life away from the town. Without stories, without photographs, I can only imagine him as I have always seen him, in this town, walking that winding road curling around the hollow, coming up the steps with that curious tread of his, carrying different offerings for my mother and me—a small fish bought with boundless pleasure from the evening market, a set of three oranges. (222)

Passages like this also reveal the fact that, though the novel is not a nostalgic search for "homeland," it is still charged with nostalgia and sadness of irrevocable loss. In her fascinating book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym says, "Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). The sadness of exile is what lingers in Babu in Deb's novel:

> Me? I return every day, sometimes under the cover of sleep, at other times stepping in 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 realization of having been torn elsewhere from home long ago. […] Until the moment of awakening drenched in sweat and the realization of having been torn elsewhere from home long ago. (153)

The narrator lovingly describes the sights and sounds of Shillong. Anyone who has visited Shillong or lived there would immediately feel familiar with the descriptions of Police Bazaar, its shops and many restaurants, the misty landscape near Barapani Lake, the music-scene of Shillong, the people, the winding streets, wooden houses, the changing seasons, and so on. Babu nostalgically recalls his schooldays, his friends, and their many exploits—some of these memories must be of the writer himself. Boym goes on to elaborate:

> At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams […] The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

The memories of the place continue to haunt him over the years. He tells us how he used to have recurring dreams about his father and the town when he was living in Delhi or Calcutta: "I dream of the old walks by Wards's Lake, Police Bazaar, reveling in a sense of freedom, the adult coming home to the haunts of the child" (160). But in these dreams, the town always takes on fantastic, dreamlike quality as most of them "consist of a landscape full of errors" (163). The town therefore becomes for Babu as much constructed as real. Nostalgia can be discerned in the following passage:

> In the spring, the gardens flowered from house to house, and in the backyards, along with shrubs and weeds, there were vines of squash, their prickly golden-green skin rough with fibre and indentations and little hollows like a piece of the earth itself. There were butterflies, berries and rare orchids in the forested walks up towards Laitkor Peak, crabs that

> scuttled along the slippery, stony beds of streams. (193)

Strangely, this nostalgia for the lost "home" goes hand in hand with a persistent sense of anger and despair throughout the narrative of the novel. "Home" for Babu is not a place of comfort or safety—it has become a place of fear and remembered and inherited trauma. Every time he dreams of the place, he wakes up in cold sweat at the memory of the violence that they had gone through.

In the last two sections of the novel, we get a glimpse of Babu's present life: he lives in Delhi, working as an editor of news reports. His life has apparently been a series of failures and disappointments. He therefore decides to visit his old hometown in an attempt to find some meaning in his own rootless, unappealing life. In Babu's desperate longing and his realization of the impossibility of "homecoming," we may discern the paradox inherent in the nostalgia that Boym speaks about. Babu has the *algia* (longing), but he realizes that he will never be able to "repair longing with belonging" (Boym xv). Coming back to the place after many years, he senses the same feeling of menace, alienation, and strangeness that he had felt during the time of riots in his youth. It makes him sad, anxious, and angry, too. While editing a news story for a Calcutta-based paper on the smuggling of butterflies from the region, he felt the same despair and anger, as he says, "I felt as if I had been robbed a little more of the past" (193). His anger and despair spring not from the fact of his having to leave "home," but more from his traumatic experience and memories of "home." But it does not stop him from invoking the place with relentless nostalgia and sadness. Babu arrives in the town and into his past like a stranger with all memories and sadness of loss. He visits the library, the newly-constructed state-archive—but everywhere he goes he encounters changes in the landscape and architecture of the place. The local people he meets, they give him a sense of his own "outsidedness" (211). He again encounters "defensive aggressiveness" (202) and lingering hatred of the local people towards a "Dkhar" like him.

But it must be remembered that Babu's last journey into the past was not to trace his roots, but to re-trace the process by which he, his parents, and so many others like them came to lose their "place" and "home" in the postcolonial nation:

> If there had been a future, or even a present worth paying attention to, had there been something other than an infinite, monotonous, endlessly

> repeating assembly line of days, perhaps my thoughts would not have turned so obsessively to the past. 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 songlines, our routes of memory, our pilgrimage paths, we would find them faltering against the documents and borders and guns. (187)

The parents and grandparents travelled through the Pandua Hills in Sylhet (now Bangladesh) to the eastern borderland of India in search of a new beginning. But the "home" they hoped to find in the new country was just a mirage, that "their destination just another place that would reject them as not part of it" (219). At the end of the novel, we see Babu literally running away from the town—an angry, desperate man who realizes that he was saying his final goodbye to the town, that he has "truly let go" of it. In the last lines of the final chapter, "Leaving Home," Babu says:

> I look at my birthplace, knowing that I will never see it again. I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen. But how you achieve that future is no longer my concern, I tell my home town. I have truly let go, I know, as I step past the impatient conductor and the door closes behind me. (227)

The exile's *nostos*—return home—remains as elusive and difficult as ever.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

Ultimately, Babu realizes the impossibility of returning home. In his refusal to celebrate the tropes of "return" and "homecoming," Deb's novel shows some affinity to Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Lucy* (1991). Like Lucy, Babu chooses to remain an exile—a writer—living in the metropole of Delhi. Deb's novel like Kincaid's novel "reads as a pitched battle against the assumptions that shape many of the oppositional narratives of exile and displacement […] that the alienating experience of 'exile' leads inevitably to the celebrations of 'return'" (Sugg 156). Also, the only things Babu can claim, like Lucy in the face of exile,

are memory and his "history." Despite the obsessive nostalgia for some kind of return, the mnemonic project undertaken by Babu emphasizes not the search for an exclusivist "homeland," but the wider and more universal themes of the elusive nature of the concepts of home and belonging. Deb's epigraphs for the novel, taken from Ursula Le Guin and Herman Melville, are clear pointers to this fact. Baishya also makes similar observations when he says that the novel is

> a phenomenological exploration of the meanings of "home," the "space of childhood" and the condition of homelessness [...] an intense exploration of the phenomenological realities engendered by the displacement of populations, and the subsequent negotiations that such displaced people and their future generations have to undergo in the sphere of everyday life with the governmental regimes of the postcolonial state apparatus. (262)

Elsewhere, Deb said this situation is true of the entire Northeast, that "all its people, whether indigenous or migrants, seem to have an uncertain, tenuous position in a nation where the lines of identity seem to be rigidly drawn" (qtd. in Pisharoty). Unequal power relations, ethnic political aspirations and conflicts, and the long history of neglect by the Indian state towards the communities living in the margins have made the region volatile and a hotbed of secessionist movements. But Deb's novel gives only the migrant's side of the story. The novel does not give voice to the long history of exploitation and dispossession faced by the indigenous people of the region and the apathy of the central government whose "one nation, one state" theory ignores the reality of what Dr. Amalendu Guha terms the "little nationalities" (2). Noting the "unmistakable note of bitterness" on the part of the narrator regarding the sad state of non-tribal rights in the hill states of the Northeast, Priyamvada Gopal makes this comment: "While the questions raised by the novel are important in their seeming intractability, it is ultimately—and ironically—undermined by an embittered refusal to engage with history with greater complexity" (182). For a long time, the indigenous tribal people had to endure contempt and outright ridicule from people of greater India. At the same time, parochial and chauvinistic postures of dominant nationalities, and appropriation of their lands and resources by people from Bangladesh made them insecure about their own survival, and they gradually became apprehensive of all outsiders. The growing feeling of uncertainty and precarity ultimately drove these little nationalities to the path of ethnic assertion and self-preservations. In spite

of this lacuna, *The Point of Return* is a novel that is related to contemporary sociopolitical processes in this contested region of the republic. Through its thoughtful narration of the ethnic struggles and plight of the peripheral people and communities, the novel speaks of the urgency of re-narrating the nation from the margins, and also calls for a revaluation of the concept of nationhood and national identity or belonging in postcolonial India.

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Abstract

Siddhartha Deb's novel *The Point of Return* (2002) is a nuanced study of the fractured relationship between an indigenous tribal people and Bengali migrants in the undivided state of Assam, and the exilic condition of these migrants in the Northeast of India (especially in Assam and Meghalaya). It also shows the painful process of cartographic reconfigurations of state boundaries along ethnic lines, and the resultant violence, uprootedness, alienation, and continued memory of loss. The paper seeks to investigate how the writer traces the lives of the first generation migrants who came to the new land in search of a better life but were condemned to live precarious lives in their adopted homeland. The novel is also about the post-partition generation who inherited the memory of their parents and grandparents and had to negotiate their own sense of belonging and identity in the face of ethnic assertion by indigenous people in the eastern borderland region. The legacy of this conflict lives on in the Northeast as the post-partition generation continues to grapple with issues like displacement, cultural confrontation, and homelessness. At the same time, we have examined how Deb utilizes the mode of memory to tell his story of migrancy and the trauma of loss and dislocation. The act of remembering, the urge to recall and revisit the historical loss, fracture, and trauma, are insistent in the text even as it grapples with issues like home, identity, citizenship, and belonging in the postcolonial nation-state.

Keywords: Northeast India, partition, migrancy, ethnicity, memory

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