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Examining the Dialectics of Belonging within Subaltern Counterpublics in Bijoya Sawian's *Shadow Men*

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the pressing need to reconstruct the traditional socio-political structure, the native population's persistent fears of losing their indigenous cultural heritage and manifestations of xenophobic politics become more evident in unprecedented ways. The conceptual gap, in this situation, between the prevailing state power and "excluded" subjects typically gives rise to "subaltern counterpublics" with countercultural values. In subaltern counterpublics, the dominance of congruent ideologies recreates the separation between the controlled and dominating classes inside the same public sphere, even when the participants are members of the marginalised group in the discursive formation process. Within subaltern communities, class consciousness, hegemony, and subalternity are pervasive at the micro-level, characterized by multipolarity, fragmentation, and divergence. This opposition extends even to totalitarian tendencies, including within the "subaltern itself" (Malik 37). This paper aims to examine the dialectics of belonging within subaltern counterpublics in the context of Meghalaya's insider-outsider discourse by highlighting this crucial location of intra-subaltern conflicts. For this purpose, Bijoya Sawian's novel *Shadow Men* is used to examine how the insider-outsider binary can be used as an ideology by the elites to further their own interests within the subaltern group. It also attempts to explore how the elites' anti-egalitarian ethos inside subaltern counterpublics manipulates subaltern politics itself while, on the other hand, the inclusive approach of the "non-conformist" subaltern postcolonial subjects occasionally appears to dispute and reassess the very basic ideas of subaltern counterpublics.

KEYWORDS

Northeast India; Meghalaya; Insider-Outsider; Belonging; Subaltern Counterpublics.

Introduction

In recent years, scholars focusing on Northeast India have become increasingly interested in exploring questions related to identity and belonging (Das 2009; Baruah 2008). Through the lens of identity politics, they have uncovered intricate dynamics of inter-group relationships that are both complex and essential for gaining deeper insights into human interactions. A significant aspect of inter-group relations is the phenomenon of "othering," which has resulted in the establishment of binaries such as "us versus them" and "majority versus minority." This is particularly evident in identity studies focusing on Northeast India, where extensive discussions have revolved around the

marginalisation experienced by people from this region in mainland India (Xaxa 2016). Nevertheless, indigenous communities in Northeast India have embraced the notion of "territorial ethnicity," a phrase coined by Meiron Weiner, suggesting a deep-rooted connection between certain ethnic groups and specific geographic spaces. Consequently, conflicts between settlers and indigenous communities, as well as ethnic violence, have intensified. Nativist sentiments, tied to issues of sovereignty and territorial primacy, exacerbate tensions among Northeast Indian communities, marked by persistent friction between indigenous groups and perceived outsiders (Kumar 2005). Thus, the politics of othering takes a reverse trajectory, where the non-native settlers of the region are marginalised and othered.

This paper examines the conflicting forms of belonging, through literary narrative, inherent in the insider-outsider discourse in Meghalaya, by highlighting the significant role of intra-subaltern conflicts. Meghalaya, situated among the Northeastern states of India, has experienced relatively less turmoil compared to its neighbouring states, which have grappled with numerous insurgent groups. However, since its establishment in 1972, the state has been marked by ongoing ethnic conflicts between the indigenous tribal population and non-tribal settler communities (Lalkulhpuia and Singh 224). Economic migration, notably from Nepal, Bangladesh, and other regions of India, both before and after the colonial era, has contributed to a sense of unease among locals. Migrant communities have come to dominate various economic sectors, including businesses, labour, and employment opportunities, further exacerbating tensions (Haokip 303). This tension has manifested in ethnic clashes, notably in 1979, 1987, and 1992, targeting communities such as Bengali, Nepali, Bihari, and Marwari. The 1980s witnessed riots primarily affecting these communities, while in the 1990s, the Bengali community bore the brunt, prompting a significant exodus of 25,000 to 35,000 individuals to other parts of India, particularly West Bengal. The Bengali population in Meghalaya dwindled from 8.13% in 1981 to 5.97% in 1991 (Phukan 99-100). Although there were some improvements in ethnic relations in the mid-1990s, recurrent flare-ups of ethnic tensions persist, indicating ongoing challenges that require attention.

Contextualising the Dialectics of Belonging within Subaltern Counterpublics

In a region marked by frequent border adjustments, Meghalaya was established on the premise of inherent "difference," specifically to segregate the hill communities from those inhabiting the plains. The deeply politicised division between tribal and non-tribal communities, frequently portraying the latter as complete outsiders, lies at the core of the recurrent conflicts witnessed in Meghalaya over the past four decades (Matta 52). Horowitz contends that ethnicity is frequently linked to "hostility towards outgroups" (7). In this context, non-tribal groups in Meghalaya are perceived as infiltrators, as their unfamiliarity and perceived otherness pose a challenge to the established foundations of social order and stability. The derogatory terms "dkhar," "outsiders," "infiltrators," etc., are often applied, particularly to Bangladeshi migrants attempting to enter India through the porous border with Northeast India. This labelling has fueled resentment and fear among tribal populations, who feel under constant threat of losing not just their land but also their language, culture, and customs. This pervasive anxiety and fear of infiltration, termed the "Tripura Syndrome" by Duncan McDuie-Ra, describes the fear of assimilation and

destruction by non-tribals settling in tribal lands, exemplified by the plight of the tribal population in Tripura (69). However, on deeper examination, one can find that the insider-outsider binary can be used as an ideology by the elites to further their own interests within the subaltern group. This, in turn, creates a divisive sense of belonging where the marginalised sections within the subaltern group are relegated to "conditioned belongingness" (Sam and Tewari 8), where they become mere instruments of violence in the hands of the powerful elites. We will also see the presence of a few "non-conforming" individuals against the system who try to uphold humanitarian values and inclusivity.

In the postcolonial context, exclusionary politics put minority communities in a conundrum, as they face the threat of neocolonial dominance while needing to find belonging within subaltern communities (Sam and Tewari 5). This dual pressure highlights the pluralistic nature of the community. However, the term "subalterns" requires re-examination within the socio-political context, as there is an ongoing dynamic of subordination between weaker and even weaker sections of marginalized communities. Antonio Gramsci introduced the term "cultural hegemony" to describe how a dominant class influences cultural norms through social institutions, benefiting ruling groups at the expense of subordinate ones (Lears 571). His concept explores the interplay between power and socio-cultural elements within capitalist systems, highlighting how moral hegemony shapes accepted sentiments in the bourgeois public sphere. As a result, moral hegemony is frequently granted by the dominance of the "moral elite(s)" (Sand 254). Often, the authoritative standards set by these moral elites dictate whether a practice is considered morally legitimate. The dominance of moral elites creates a psychological divide for those with opposing views, challenging the assumed equality in participatory parity. This ideological divergence leads to a redefinition of citizenship as legal membership in the political system. Thus, merely being designated as a citizen does not guarantee equal opportunity for everyone to achieve a sense of belonging. Exclusionary politics persist, often marginalizing groups such as the poor, women, disabled individuals, and ethnic minorities while favouring those who are already well-represented in society.

In the journey towards "becoming" a citizen by moving beyond the continuous adherence to dominant judgment through equal participation, the issue of exclusionary politics remains significant (Sam and Tewari 2). Highlighting equal access for private individuals to engage in public debate, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of the "bourgeois public sphere." Habermas's concept champions the effectiveness of a critical dialogic negotiation in identifying common social issues and subsequently shaping necessary political actions that reflect shared interests. However, revising Habermas's impartial concept of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser argues that marginalized alternative discourses are manipulated and relegated to the periphery of the established consensus within the public sphere. Fraser posits that historically, members of subordinated social groups—such as women, workers, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ individuals—have frequently found it beneficial to form alternative publics (67). She identifies these socially marginalized groups as subaltern counterpublics. Social inequality creates a persistent "contestatory relationship" between these counterpublics and the more privileged segments of society. The deliberate preference of monopolizing sections within the public sphere confines socially marginalized groups to being "weak publics," whose opinions are never

considered as significant contributors to decision-making.

Ideological Divides and the Ensuing Exclusion of Alternative Discourse

When there is the primary responsibility for opposing the looming presence of misgovernance in the region, the inclination to assert one's own knowledge in debating against the native antagonistic ochlocracy is doubly compromised. This study examines Bijoya Sawian's novel *Shadow Men* to identify how the dominance of an analogous discourse (something that imitates its oppressor) materialises deprivation of agency. Set in Shillong, the narrative depicts the ideological disparity between the corrupt politicians, the so-called elites, and the crippling unemployment and difficult lives of the common indigenous community. In a region already facing troubles, power-hungry politicians exacerbate the situation. They exploit the victims of uncertainty for their own gain, driving them deeper into instability. The novel starts with Raseel, a Delhi resident, travelling to Shillong, her childhood home, to spend the summer with Aila, her friend. Since Aila has left on a trip with her husband, Raseel stays in her home with the assistance of a housekeeper and driver. One day, however, she eyewitnesses what she believes to be a murder: three men, one of whom is armed, ascend the stairs leading to the gardener's cottage within the compound, one of them goes inside while the other two remains outside, and Raseel hears a gunshot inside the cottage. They descend the slope with a long duffle bag from the scene. She discovers that Suresh and Ravi are the two boys who live in the cottage, and she becomes "cold with fright" (Sawian 1). To Shillong's residents, the cottage's occupants were "dkhars," who are seen as enemies of the Khasis. Raseel begins to wonder if this is ethnic cleansing.

In subaltern counterpublics, as Frazer argues, the dominance of congruent ideologies recreates the separation between the constrained and dominating classes inside the same public sphere, even when the participants are members of the marginalised group in the discursive formation process. As the narrative unfolds in *Shadow Men*, what becomes clear is that the Boss desired the crime to occur in a prestigious residence to attract attention. Clear directives were issued that the violence resulting from the murder should not be interpreted as "ethnic or communal," but rather as "anti-government" (Sawian 35). The Boss commanded that it should seem more like a law and order issue, to portray the youth as disillusioned with the government. Even before Raseel discusses the issue with those in the house, an MLA, who is described as being "part of the cesspool," ironically named Justice, has his car burned and tells his wife, "If anyone else rings up to inquire, please sound suitably agitated. Remember I am at Ron's farm out of reach by telephone and I left my mobile behind" (Sawian 27). The minister knows that, as part of the Opposition in the State government, in response to the crime in the state, people would protest. To get their attention, they would advocate for a 60% reservation for Khasis and Jaintias, considering them to "deserve more", a 30% reservation for Garos, who currently has 40% and a 10% reservation for others (Sawian 28). However, he also plans to bribe several ministers from the ruling party to ensure the government does not concede. Further protests are expected during Independence Day, he has already compiled a list of houses (including his own) to be targeted, vehicles to be set ablaze, and areas to be disrupted. The cabinet will be dissolved, and he will strive to become the Chief Minister. Ultimately, for people like the Boss and the minister (Bah Jus), it all comes down to wealth and influence to further their "dream and political career" (Sawian 73). As the character Robert rightly observes "they

(dkhars) are the punching bags," and the crime "is merely a statement" to get the attention of the masses. The narrative portrays how powerful leaders and politicians effectively sow discord between various tribes and between tribes and dkhars with the end of achieving their ambitions.

Unfortunately, the public believes their leadership without much thought. While participating in the violence that the elites conspire, workers like Strong and Ksan, both "middle-aged men with receding hairlines" (Sawian 80) and paunches, are exhausted by their activities and seem to know that they are being used by their boss for their own interests. Talking about their boss, the conversation between Strong and Ksan is clear:

> "I am so tired of it all, Ksan, not just this moment. I am tired of all this shit,' Strong shouted. 'Where is all this going to lead? We are just following the Boss' orders. It's been going on for so long."
> "He thinks, plans, orders and. . ."
> "And we follow, right? Yet does that scum care? Will all of this bring the government to the table? Does the government care? Does Delhi care? Does anyone care? Or are we being used, just simply used for the Boss' gains? He is using us, Ksan. He is using these kids too."
> . . .
> "They are doing what they believe is going to eventually lead them to a better future—jobs, opportunities, a great life ahead. Poor things!"
> "Like we did once. . ." (Sawian 46)

Later in the novel, they no longer see any "difference" between their own leaders and the earlier dominant oppressors:

> "Tell me Ksan, tell me what's the difference between them and the earlier rulers—the British, the Assamese, the Indians? Eventually it is just about the powerful versus the powerless."
> . . .
> "They will plunder their own land and destroy their own people. Khasi will destroy Khasi. The process has already begun. They will be blind to everything but money and power." (Sawian 75)

They remain helpless for lack of better opportunities. Individuals such as Strong and Ksan, who value diverse viewpoints as the above excerpt from the text shows, feel compelled to keep quiet despite participating in the construction of a collective discourse. The ethical subtleties of conflictual politics inside the subaltern counterpublics are implied by the characters' discursive estrangement. They are motivated to develop a cohesive public discourse with other fellow workers by the agonising distress that resulted from a rigged system of governance.

Conditioned Sense of Belonging and the Compromised Ethical Principles

The question of belonging to the same socio-demographic ethos motivates the weaker sections to form a shared identity with their powerful political leaders. For instance, many locals tend to concentrate more on "breaking away from Indian colonialism!" (Sawian 100). They feel that Delhi treats them like a step-parent and believe that none of the economic reforms will benefit the Northeast region, leading them to demand secession. However, their outright frustration is generated not only towards the authorities but also their societal setup that follows the matrilineal system. Strong says, "But that's what a Khasi man is, isn't he? A visitor in his wife's house" (Sawian 85). Reflecting on the uncertain fate of men from the Khasi community, Robert's outburst in the early part of the narrative strongly focuses on this aspect:

> ". . . the men here are in a terrible state. We are sad, we are desperate and all these terrible emotions stem from that. We own not a patch of

> land, not a penny, nothing. Even our children belong to their mothers. Unless one gets a government job what does one do? Nothing! We are fighting for *equal distribution* of wealth but till that comes through most of us just float around like scum in a stagnant well. . . That's the truth that no one understands." (Sawian 30; my emphasis)

In the subaltern counterpublics of Sawian's *Shadow Men*, characters like Strong and Ksan in particular struggle to assert their agency within the overwhelming uniformity, or the struggle for "equal distribution" of resources, imposed by the elite and societal forces. In a sense, the greater good of the community is used as a tool by the elites to fool the common people into participating in their machination. The words of Roland Lamare, a "high-profile ex-politician," ring loud of this conniving tactic: "See, son, once you join the Movement you have to think only for its good. That is very important. We will obviously compensate you handsomely for your sacrifice" (Sawian 67).

Fraser recognises the implications of discursive multiplicities and is well aware of the powerful individuals' ability to dictate public discourse by designating some events as central to it. Fraser describes this process of disseminating these institutionalised ideologies as the "hegemonic mode of domination" (62). This mode of hegemony shows the possibility that subaltern counterpublics could be anti-democratic. Fraser (1990) acknowledges this by stating that she does not mean "to suggest that subaltern counterpublics are always necessarily virtuous; some of them are explicitly anti-democratic, and anti-egalitarian" (67). Such a "hegemonic mode of domination" is carried out through overt violence as well as through the production of knowledge. The extreme form of this practice is portrayed through the killing of people within their own group, as Ksan blurted out in utter dismay, "We are attacking our own blood" (Sawian 101). For instance, the secret killing of Kong Bonili who has gone all the way to find out who has committed the murder and "heard everything" through a "medium" (Sawian 91). The narrator says that she is disposed of with the assistance of a "loyalist doctor" which was construed as a "sudden demise" due to a "heart attack" (Sawian 101). Another example is the killing of Aibor who has threatened to "spill the beans" along with Robert (Sawian 120).

In contrast, we see through the character of Niro, a 14-year-old boy, who is recruited by the Organisation to spread false rumours throughout the town. Owing to his poverty-stricken family, he willingly took up the job: "Niro had spent the entire week all over town, in his usual haunts, telling people about the robbery and murder in Bah Aibor's house" (Sawian 123). People begin to genuinely believe that what happened in Aila's house was indeed a "robbery and murder" (Sawian 123). In response to his work, the household amenities, such as the sofa, TV, and refrigerator, are all accounted for. Since Niro's family now lives comfortably, no one questions Niro's activities. After all, the Organization is perceived as doing what is best for the people, and Niro is merely supporting the cause. At the age of 14, he likely dropped out of school to work for the Boss. He would eventually become someone like Strong or Ksan, realizing that all the commotion is a farce and ultimately living in disillusionment.

Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence" relates to the politicised production of knowledge about others, even if it is theoretically linked to Michel Foucault's analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge. Epistemic violence is not physical aggression; rather, it is the spread of knowledge and information through speech, writing, and controlled discourse. According to Spivak,

"the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to construct the colonial subject as the Other" is the strongest illustration of such epistemic violence that now exists (76). The legitimate utterances of the subaltern people are deliberately shaped and reshaped by the dominant sections through this contrived process of epistemic violence. The skewed examination of the characters' interaction with the "outsider" also demonstrates the spread of this kind of prejudiced narrative at the expense of marginalised ones. Some of the excerpts from the novel are as follows:

> ". . . the dkhars will always look down us tribals" (Sawian 26)
>
> . . .
>
> "The dkhars are usurping our jobs, they are stealing our women—get them out, kill them—the Garos are letting the seats go waste, they could never fill them—protest" (Sawian 29)
>
> . . .
>
> "The resentment of the locals, especially the men, was palpable. They stood convinced that the dkhars were the enemies of the land, the grabbers and usurpers of what could have been theirs. At the same time they knew that that was only half the story."
>
> "The other half festered in their minds." (Sawian 43)

The leaders promise a lot, from protesting against outsiders to pushing for fewer reserved seats for the Garo tribe and subtly trying to change matriliny in the area. However, achieving these goals often involves some unlawful activities. As Robert states, "... it has nothing to do with the police, it's not a crime" (Sawian 62). But that is the cost one must bear to overcome fear. In a place with limited opportunities, he must compete not only with his fellow tribesmen but also with the so-called outsiders for employment. "That's what's floating on top" (Sawian 29). The strongest individuals will find opportunities, while others will have to rely on informal and illegal methods to get by, and this will be tolerated. Those who cannot manage even that will lack respect, causing fear among the men. Consequently, when an ambitious leader manipulates this fear to rally them against the system and outsiders to achieve his own goals, they will inevitably follow him. Just as the army directs its fear and frustration towards powerless substitutes—people not involved in the insurgency—the Khasi men transfer their fear onto powerless outsiders.

Transcending Popular Ideologies by "Non-Conforming" Discourses

Underscoring the need for moral judgement in assessing the democratic understanding of the counterpublics, some repressive publics with their opposing viewpoints are frequently confined to the more marginalised segments of the subaltern counterpublics (Sam and Tewari 8). Even while these alternate public spaces are designed to preserve marginalised discourses, they frequently contain a few "dissident" voices that strive to promote these groups' solidarity in pursuit of progressive goals. By giving voice to alternative ideologies, these seemingly "nonconforming" discourses inside the subaltern groups seek to uphold humanitarian ideals. To shed further light on this issue, we can look at specific instances in the novel when the narrator's moral awareness supports her wish to uphold a distinct judgement based on securing justice by rejecting the discursive consolidation of popular narrative. Her good intentions, however, are overshadowed by the public's conformist narrative (represented by characters like Strong, Ksan, Robert, Aila etc.). The narrator Raseel is unable to establish her own agency. In the Prologue, she states, "I found myself dreaming a dream so frightening that it woke me forever." Having

witnessed what she believes to be a murder, Raseel suspects that everything might have been premeditated but cannot determine a motive. She informs the police that one of the three men has leucoderma, but the police officer shows no surprise or shock. Aila's father intends to shield Raseel from involvement in the matter. When Raseel manages to speak with her friend over the phone, Aila's voice lacks any emotional reaction. Through her narration, her disturbed demeanour is expressed as she speaks to Aila over the phone:

> "Yes, I. . .well, I sort of saw almost the whole crime. The boy they've locked up is not your garden help, Ravi. Aila, there is some terrible mistake somewhere. This is something very wrong, very wrong. I saw the murderers, Aila. I can even identify one. . .Aila?"
> There was no response. . . .
> "Aila?"
> "Yes, Ras.' A whisper. "
> "I am sorry. Ras, please just take care till we come. I am really sorry."
> (Sawian 107)

Aila comes from a prominent family in Shillong, with her father being the son of an English tea planter and her mother a highborn Khasi woman. She likely has no grievances against the dkhars but finds herself "involved" unwittingly because of her husband's deal with the Boss. Additionally, the narrator's psychic vacillation between affirming her emotional bond with Aila and defending her sense of belonging with the other Khasis is consistent with her enhanced emotion brought about by universal ethics. However, she remains powerless in influencing any changes even if she identifies with the Khasis because she belongs to a different ethnicity.

In addition, the "non-conformist" subalterns in the novel are portrayed through the characters of the housekeeper Kmie U Flin and her cousin Bonili, who actively seek to identify the killer. The narrator introduces Kong Bonili's firm conviction for justice when she says: "We are not just roaming around Kong Raseel. We are also going to try and find out who has committed this crime" (Sawian 77). They visit a nongpeit (tantric soothsayer), but he refuses their case, stating that a higher power has already contacted him. They then visit a Muslim baba, who invokes Suresh's spirit and makes it speak through Kmie U Flin. Kmie does not remember anything while possessed, but her cousin hears everything. But, Bonili is eliminated with the help of a "loyalist doctor" (Sawian 101). These characters represent the repressive publics within the subaltern counterpublics who are relegated to the margins, and even killed. Here, characters such as Raseel, Kmie U Flin and Kong Bonili defend their moral authority by fostering a counterargumentative stance against a biased postcolonial fabrication that, at times, lumps all "outsiders" together under the umbrella of oppressive and scary mindscapes. In contrast, characters like Strong and Ksan cannot adopt a stance against the oppressive forces within the subaltern counterpublics, they find themselves stuck because they feel compelled to affirm their belongingness to the other Khasis. Thus, through the process of psychological integration, the narrative focuses on the significance of transcending from one's own socio-demographic morality to a universal morality founded on the universal principles of kindness, compassion, and generosity.

Conclusion

The apprehension with which the natives or the "insiders" confront the supposed "outsiders" is a widespread issue of concern that is not unique to Meghalaya. Ethnic violence and conflicts in India's Northeast reflect the nation's broader fractures. Dominant communities like Jats, Marathas, Patels, and Brahmins have sought "backward class" status to gain

state benefits, highlighting the impact of identity politics (Paranjape). The politics of belonging is often seen as a strategy to gain greater access and control over state resources, such as development budgets, government jobs, affirmative action, and the reorganization of states. These resources are typically accessed "through the politics of identity and belonging" (Tunyi and Wouters 7). Additionally, there have also been studies on how the colonial encounter and existing policies of the Indian government have a significant impact on how we view the interaction between people and places in Northeast India (Baruah 1999). However, beyond these external and tangible explanations, it becomes apparent that within the same ethnic group, conflicting notions of belonging frequently emerge due to class differences, a factor that is often overlooked. It is this ideological gap between the non-conformists and the dominant conformists that underscores how the privatization of morality by the dominant groups within subaltern counterpublics undermines an inclusive socio-cultural balance. Willke and Willke explain that a key aspect of modernity is the privatization of morals, reducing them to a private matter and substituting public morality with the innovative concept of democratic legislative processes (29). In this context, the unitary decision-making potential of the counterpublics can only be realized through the acknowledgement of diverse moral standards. Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere advocates for egalitarian participation in public discourse, aiming to address general concerns through inclusive dialogue. However, Fraser critiques this model, arguing that it overlooks the marginalized positions of oppressed groups who lack equitable access. She asserts that Habermas's singular public sphere fails to accommodate diverse discourses, and thus, she proposes the idea of subaltern counterpublics, which include all marginalized groups and their alternative ideologies. True cohabitation can only be achieved through mutual recognition and respect for alternative narratives, fostered by affection, and empathy.

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