

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Demystifying the Stereotype: A Critical Reading of Kishalay Bhattacharjee's *Che in Paona Bazaar*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is to highlight how the author has attempted to demystify the stereotypical representation of North- East. The North- East is not merely a hot-bed of insurgency, there are other realities as well- of forbidden love, weddings, cuisine, childhood memories, and other 'unimportant stories' that never made it to our newspaper and television screens. Bhattacharjee tries to present an alternative and private vision of North East in *Che in paona Bazaar* and I have attempted to document and highlight the process through which Bhattacharjee tried to achieve his goal. I have consciously avoided critical jargons though at places a few theoretical assumptions have been added.

Keywords: Relations, Forbidden love, Weddings, Cuisine, Childhood memories.

The North Eastern part of India has always been represented as an exotic land and the writers who have represented this part of India have shown biased attitude. If the East was configured by the Orientalists as stereotypical and exotic, than India's North-East has suffered the same fate. If the orientalist represented the East as Exotic (in this case the waster orientalist) then the mainland of India treated the North- East with neglect and disdain. Apart from a few benevolent and understanding souls, India's North East has not received any sympathy from the center. The North East has not only been neglect, it has also been configured as an "Imagined Community" (a term used by Benedict Anderson). The politics of representation regarding India's North East has not been well documented except a few scattered observations by scholars and academicians belonging to different fields. The North Eastern part of India has been stereotypically represented in fictions and non-fictional works also. Kishalay Bhattacharjee's *Che in Paona Bazaar* demystifies the stereotypical representation of North- East and the aim of this paper is to highlight how the author has attempted to do that. The North-East is not merely a hot-bed of insurgency,

there are other realities as well- of forbidden love, weddings, cuisine, childhood memories, and other 'unimportant stories' that never made it to our newspaper and television screens. Bhattacharjee tries to present an alternative and private vision of North East in *Che in paona Bazaar* and I have attempted to document and highlight the process through which Bhattacharjee tried to achieve his goal. I have consciously avoided critical jargons though at places a few theoretical assumptions have been added. This paper basically concentrates on the text and I have not attempted to go beyond the text by being too speculative.

Buri Ma lives near a place which is besides the cremation ground. She lives a simple life but has noble ambitions. She nurtures cultural heritage and rituals but she also gives shelter to infants. Bhat begins with an invocation to terrorism but says that people live normal lives also. Like Lyotard, Bhat gives importance to mini- narrative of small statured people against the construction of grand narrative of bomb and terrorism. Bhat goes back and forth in time to tell his tale. Bhat gives importance to those stories which are seemingly unimportant but pregnant with deep human reality. There are the mini- narratives

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which do not find a place in the mainstream news. Bhat does not like the stereotypical representation of North East, he wants to tell the reader something different and he is against the so-called condescending outlook of North East India. If the orientalists had represented India in a stereotypical manner during the days of colonialism, then India's mainstream had looked at the North East with the same outlook. If Delhi has been the centre then the North East has been relegated to the level of a margin on periphery.

Bhat remembers his formative years in Shillong which has been idyllic and full of fun, not of fear and frustration. According to him, there is no single narrative that can reveal the complexities of North East that is inhabited by people belonging to different ethnic classes or communities or groups. Bhat however remembers the agitation against the non-tribals by the tribals in Shillong during the period of 1979. The tribals felt insecure and reacted against particularly the Bengalis, who according to the tribals were usurping the economy of the regions. Bhat tells how that incident went somehow escaped the attention of the media. But having said that, Bhat does not tell that the North- East is a hot bed of insurgency. Bhat talks about post- conflict literature which is not a testament of collective pain. Bhat recollects the memories of India's North East through various sources and in this connection he makes a personal sojourn. Bhat invents a fictional character named Eshei who turns out to be the story teller and navigates through 'Youth Love and loss in the backdrop of the conflict but is also faced with the universal trails of everyday reality.' Bhat also wants to showcase an outsider's view of North- East but through sympathy and compassion, debunking the stereotypical representation. He does not follow a linear pattern, but has used a mixture of genres combining the text with personal correspondences. Bhat is against the old patterns of representation of North East as he says "It is a personal rendering of a people who are perceived as a single entity, wrongfully identified as a single entity and have been trapped in images that mark them as xenophobic, militant, aggressive and different from the rest of us."

If the orientalists represented the Non-West as their 'others', then India's mainstream has also treated it as its 'civilizational others'.

The people of North East India could not utter the realities of their experience nor could they make themselves heard in front of the mainstream media and this text informs the reader about this fact. There is an attempt to make a direct connection between the readers and the real people and not 'imagined communities' (term first used by Benedict Anderson in his ground breaking book of the same title) Bhat tries to prove his thesis through concentration upon three important places of North East- Manipur, Guwahati and Shillong. He has used the metaphor of food that can weave together the taste of a community and a generation of writers like Anita Desai uses the theme of food in her novel *Fasting Feasting*.

In spite of Bhat's scrutiny on other areas of North- East it is basically the tale of Manipur that forms the foreground and background of the book. We find matters other than stereotypical image of North East, we come to know about its culture, folklore, heritage etc. However Bhat says that he deliberately avoids the idea of polygamy in urban Manipur or the genocide by terror groups as he wants to tell an alternative tale of love, bonhomie and peace.

Bhat narrates the grim situation of North East and the often volatile condition of the region but he places stress on the narrative of ordinary people who form the backbone of the region. But he suffers from a sense of uncertainty as he says that- "In spite of my effort, I fear that my narrative can only offer a modest glimpse into their lives and I hope that I have been able to capture their real- life experiences, their stories in their voices and often, in their words."

The process of stereotypical formation of the North East takes place at a dual level. People living within the North East also stereotype it and people living out the North East also stereotype it. Thus the North East becomes an unreal place. The exoticization also takes place at several places. The North-East has been described as a place of uncanny incidents and happenings. What Edward W. Said tried to expostulate in his ground breaking book *Orientalism* (1978) can be applied to the context of the North East. Said showed how the so-called oriental scholar mystified the orient.

Similarly the North-East is also sought to be mystified by the so-called mainstream

and center of power. The North- East, as Elwin Wrote in his essay titled *My Impressions about Assam* has been configured as an exotic land, full of unearthly charm. When we mention the name of Jim Corbett we are reminded of his so called exoticization of remote forest places of India. He was hailed as a savior of people as he killed the man-eaters and similarly the North-East becomes a microscope within the macrocosm of India. The North East is also regarded as a dangerous place where terrorists are always waiting with arms to kill the outsiders. Kishlay Bhattacharjee demystifies the process of stereotypical configuration of the North East in his book and he succeeds because he writes from an insiders' point of view. He has shown the ground reality of Manipur, Particularly Imphal in his book *Che in Paona Bazaar*. What has struck him as major factor that the North East has always been looked at from the particular viewpoint. The book under discussion attempts to discard many such illusions and conceptions which are contrary to truth.

The Sense of exile also pervades the narrative as Bhattacharjee tries to show how the people of the North- East feel exile in their own land. It is sought to be established in the book that how a group of people with their distinctive culture and ritual feel alien in their own land. The title *Che in Paona Bazaar* becomes significant from the perspective that Imphal has become a place which has been pervaded by western modes of behaviour. The sense of belonging comes only when the people of the land feel affinity with the rest of the country. But Kishlay Bhattacharjee shows how the people of the north east do not feel any sense of belonging because they do not have that kind of affinity with rest of the country as the mainstream not only ignores them but also gives and exhibits a step-motherly attitude towards them. Bhattacharjee shows how the people of the North- East feel alienated and cut off from the rest of the country. Life in the north east has a rhythm of its own a cultural mosaic and unique socio-political structure. Bhattacharjee writes with a sense of anguish and utter chagrin regarding why the inhabitants of the North- East had to feel a sense of isolation.

Bhattacharjee does not write without any factual base or authentic point of view. He is not one of those foreigners who looks at the North- East with exotic eye. He represents

what he has experienced and demystifies whatever is stereotypical. For that he takes recourse to witness literature and as he meets local people and hears their stories, he becomes both sympathetic and compassionate towards them. It is not untrue that the North East witness terrorism but Bhattacharjee goes beyond that as he tells us nice stories about daily life of the people of North East. He writes aptly-

I've collected anecdotes from those street fighting years, stories told to me by the soldiers... some of them are silly but witty as well. Documentation of Assam and for that matter, the regions contemporary history is grossly inadequate. I felt stories of the people who have witnessed the turbulence and disillusionment can never be replaced by any alternate fiction or narrative. I have tried to retain much of the flavor of these stories.

Bhattacharjee does exactly what he proclaims and that is why his representation of the North East does not become stereotypical. In the conclusion we can say that Bhattacharjee represents the North-East with all its different hues and colors. He does not want to sell sensational tales to the western world or to the mainstream power center. His representation is not biased but authentic and he laces his narrative with several heart-felt anecdotes. The readers become convinced that *Che in Paona Bazaar* is not just another book about the North-East which sells false stories. It is a book that contest and demystifies the stereotypical representation of the North- East and this is exactly why the book will be remembered for a long time.

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