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### Problematics of “Home” and Diasporic Identity: The Manipuri Community of Bangladesh in N. Kunjamohan Singh’s Short Story “Liching”

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#### Abstract

The Manipuris or Meeteis/Meiteis are one of the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh who trace their origins to the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur. Whereas the challenges of living as a religious and linguistic minority have come to shape their day-to-day political consciousness, the collective folk memories of the beloved land of the early ancestors continue to sustain their sense of self-identity. This idea finds expression in the short story “Liching” from the Sahitya Akademy Award winning book of Manipuri short stories, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao (The Taste of an Hilsa)* (1973) written by N. Kunjamohan Singh. In the story, Kunjamohan deftly touches upon the issues of homeland and diaspora by setting his Manipuri characters against the backdrop of the 1964 East Pakistan Riots. Situated in its specific historical context, the story reveals a rather complex problem faced by these diasporic Manipuris: the sufferings associated with dual forced migration, first from Manipur to the eastern part of Bengal in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century and again from East Pakistan to India in 1964. In the light of this observation, the present paper seeks to analyse Kunjamohan’s short story “Liching” through the lenses of diaspora studies and cultural studies. The study will try to delve into the problematics of locating the diasporan’s home in the ancestral homeland (Tölölyan 2011) and discuss the role of identity politics in shaping the contours of diasporic experience.

**Keywords:** Manipuri, Diaspora, Homeland, Memory, Migration.

#### Introduction:

The Manipuris or Meeteis/Meiteis are a Tibeto-Burman speaking community mainly residing in the Northeastern Indian state of Manipur, with significant populations in Assam and Tripura as well as in the neighbouring countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh. Mainly owing to political factors, large numbers of Manipuris migrated to the present-day Bangladesh in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. These Manipuris, who are mostly concentrated in the Sylhet district, transformed into Pakistani citizens as a direct consequence of the partition of India in 1947. Following that, people of this community has

remained witness to the various socio-political upheavals in the country. Against this backdrop, the present paper makes an attempt to explore the political identity of the Manipuris living in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) during the 1964 East Pakistan Riots as represented in the Manipuri writer N. Kunjamohan's Singh's short story "Liching" ("The Motivation") from his collection *Ilisha Amagi Mahao (The Taste of an Hilsa)*, published in 1973. Especially, how the story delves into the problematics of "Home" and identity will be the main focus of the study. In doing so, the paper will also examine the attitude of Bangladeshi Manipuris towards India during the early days of post-partition. The study will be carried out through the lenses of diaspora studies and cultural studies.

### **The Manipuri Community in Bangladesh:**

The first arrival of Manipuris in the present-day Bangladesh may be dated back to 1604 or 1606 during the reign of King Khagemba (1597-1652) in Manipur which was at that time known as Kangleipak. Owing to a dispute between the royal brothers, Prince Sanongba and many of his followers fled from Manipur and raised an army comprising the local soldiers from the neighbouring Sylhet and Cachar which attacked the palace of Khagemba in 1606. Sanongba was defeated and it is widely believed that many of his followers stayed back in Sylhet who later became the first ancestors of the present Bangladeshi Manipuris (Khuman 13).

The migration of Manipuris on a large scale started during the reign of King Bhagyachandra (1764-1789). However, the largest migration took place during the seven-year devastation (Chahi Taret Khuntakpa) of Manipur by the Burmese forces from 1819 to 1826. During these seven years, King Chourajit Singh and his two younger brothers, Marjit Singh and Gambhir Singh took refuge in Sylhet. They were accompanied by a hoard of Manipuri subjects. A palace of the Manipuri kings was also built during the time at Mirzajangal of the Sylhet town. As per the 1991 Census, the Manipuri population in Bangladesh was around 25,000 (Sheram).

It can be assumed that the formation of the Manipuri diaspora in the present-day Bangladesh was a direct consequence of the Partition of India. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947 when greater Sylhet was annexed to East Pakistan, the Manipuri population residing there naturally became Pakistani citizens. Later in 1983-84, greater Sylhet was divided into four districts viz. Sylhet, Maulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj where the majority of the Manipuris reside today (Hossain). Interestingly, while these people see themselves as diasporic Manipuris, as expressed through their literature, folk imagination and political expressions, it may not be appropriate to term them as Indian diaspora. This idea will be elaborately discussed later in the paper.

### **N. Kunjamohan Singh's "Liching" ("The Motivation"):**

N. Kunjamohan Singh is a Sahitya Akademi award winning writer from Manipur. His short story "Liching" ("The Motivation") which was written in 1967 and included in the collection *Ilisha Amagi Mahao (The Taste of an Hilsa)* published in 1973 is a tale about a Manipuri family in East Pakistan during the 1964 Riots. The story centres on an old Manipuri woman and her grandchildren, Bhaskar and Chandra, who are compelled to escape from East Pakistan and migrate to India due to religious unrest in their country. When the story opens, we see an elderly Manipuri woman waiting anxiously for her grandson, Bhaskar, who has not returned home although it is evening. It is the time of riots

and the Manipuri people are contemplating escape from East Pakistan realising the precariousness of the situation. One of the old woman's neighbours, Tombinou, brings the news about the recent atrocities on the Hindus in the Parwa region of East Pakistan, including the news of a suspected case of abduction of a Manipuri girl by the rioters. Tombinou hints at the fact that all the Manipuri families of the area are planning to leave East Pakistan on that night itself and to reach India by crossing a river five miles away from their village. But the woman seems reluctant to leave as she believes that East Pakistan is their home where she would like to stay till her last breath. As Bhaskar, the grandson, returns, he and his sister, Chandra, start making preparations for the escape. The grandmother joins them against her own will in the migratory journey. As they approach an old banyan tree in the outskirts of the village, the old woman recalls her deceased son and daughter-in-law whose last rites were performed under the tree. The woman kneels down, starts weeping heart-wrenchingly and, denying to move, urges her grandchildren to proceed without her. Through an evaluative analysis of individual passages and the events in the story against their historical backdrop, the paper seeks to delve into the problematics of home and identity vis-à-vis the Manipuri community of East Pakistan.

### **The 1964 Riots of East Pakistan and its impact on Manipuris:**

The anti-Hindu riots of 1964 in East Pakistan remains a dark event in the history of the Indian Subcontinent. The whole incident was triggered by the news of the theft of a religious relic, believed to be a strand of Prophet Mohammed's beard, from Kashmir's Hazratbal Shrine on 27 December 1963 (Mazumdar). It was alleged that Hindus were the culprit behind the incident and subsequently anti-Hindu sentiments swept across the country. Thousands of Hindus were targeted by the majority Muslims, resulting in murders, rapes and abductions in places like Khulna, Dhaka, Narayanganj and Rajshahi among others. The riots also led to the exodus of thousands of Hindus and Christians to India, who were rehabilitated in different parts of the country (Ghosh). As Manipuris can be termed as a micro-community within the minority Hindu community in East Pakistan at that time, their plight during the riots of 1964 have remained largely unrecorded in the mainstream victim narratives of the Bengali Hindus. The fact that many Manipuris were also victimised and forced to leave their homes is aptly presented in N. Kunjamohan Singh's short story "Liching." Thus, in the context of East Pakistan's political history, the short story, "Liching," can be considered as an important work for its depiction of a truthful historical account from the ethnic minorities' perspective.

### **The Idea of "Homeland" and the Manipuris of East Pakistan:**

The concept of the homeland remains an important component of diaspora studies. According to Khachig Tololyan, an essential feature of diasporic identity is the orientation towards the homeland (26). But at the same time, he also argues that one must not try to locate the diasporan's home in the ancestral homeland too easily (27). What a diasporic person considers as "home" may not be same with their ancestral homeland. This idea is represented in the short story "Liching" through the character of the old woman, the protagonist. Although her ancestors originated from Manipur, she comes to accept East Pakistan as her home:

... this is the land where our ancestors have been residing for many generations, clearing jungles and filling up swamps and wetlands. How can we leave this place so easily? No, I won't leave. Why should I? Even if I die, no problem; death comes to everybody one day or the other! Instead of dying in an unknown and foreign land of strangers, I prefer to die here in this land of my birth. (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 20)

(Translated from Manipuri)

It is interesting to note how she views India as foreign and East Pakistan as her own land. The place where she grows up and spends her life becomes her only home, whereas any other place becomes a land of strangers.

Homi K. Bhabha opines that there are two aspects of home: one is the idea of "the normalized, the naturalized, the inevitable, the original" which is "always there" and the other is the idea that home is what one returns to (2017). In the case of the old protagonist of the story, both the aspects of home are relevant. On the one hand, she can realise that her original homeland is in Manipur and so an urge for return works in her mind. The trope of return to homeland is present here. She says:

What elders used to tell us is turning out to be true. Don't build good houses, don't buy too much land and property they said, because one day we will surely be forced to leave this country. For us Meiteis it is but natural to return to Meiteileibak, the land of origin of our ancestors. (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 19)

(Translated from Manipuri)

The old woman's belief in the inevitable return to the ancestral homeland is emboldened by an implicit sense of Meitei nationalism, where she imagines her deep-rooted link with Manipur and the people there whom she has never even met. She is, in Benedict Anderson's frame of reference, a part of the imagined community whose members live with the dream of communion with other fellow members of the group without even seeing each other (Anderson 6).

The old woman's sense of desire for return to the original homeland is in keeping with the classical model of diaspora. But on the other hand, her reluctance to leave East Pakistan and her belief that she belongs here goes against the classical trope of return of the diaspora. Her reluctance to settle anywhere else is illustrated in these lines:

Aren't we born in this country? ... We must try to survive and endure till the last moment. There is no surety regarding our survival in that foreign land where we don't know anyone and where we might not even get enough to eat. Since everyone is destined to die, is it not better to die here in my own country, in my own village, in my own house?" (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 22).

(Translated from Manipuri)

Here, the protagonist's idea of home conforms to Bhabha's first concept of home as the normalised and naturalised entity which one accepts as a given, inevitable aspect of one's existence (2017). According to Avtar Brah, home is

...the site of everyday lived experience ... It is a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from...our networks of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other 'significant others'... It

signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a neighbourhood. (4)

This idea of home is clearly reflected in the protagonist's deep affection for her village, the house she lived in, the banyan tree under whose shade her son was cremated, the domestic animals she is about to leave behind. All these elements constitute her sense of home in East Pakistan.

Commenting on the fluid and changing meaning of the diasporic home Robin Cohen argues that for a diasporic community different events in the original homeland can often lead to the emergence of new centres of belonging as the group in question may experience new sites in their present condition that become functional equivalents of the original homeland (123). In a similar line of thinking, Avtar Brah considers home as being constituted by a "sense of feeling at home" (4), indicating that a space where one feels comfortable and secure can be called one's home. In that sense, it may be argued that insecurity and discomfort in a place of residence likely puts a question mark on the status of that space as home. This idea is expressed in the short story "Liching", through the words of Tombinou. He insists that East Pakistan is no longer safe for non-Muslims and they should inevitably leave the country: "How can one stay in this country where we can't protect our self-respect, dignity and our properties? Nobody wishes to part with the land of birth. But there is no other way" (23). Tombinou's words suggest that a group of people who cannot live peacefully and with dignity in their adopted homeland have to search for a new home in another place. It may be argued that in the story the Manipuris of East Pakistan who migrated to India at that time must have experienced a double consciousness with regards to the hostland. For them, India would simultaneously be a new home and the old home. It is a new home because of the Manipuris' very long historical rootedness in East Pakistan and it can be called the old home because these people's ancestral homeland, Manipur, was now a state of India.

### **The Role of Politics and the Manipuris as Indian Diaspora:**

It is notable that the precarious condition of the Manipuri community in East Pakistan is shaped by the contemporary politics of anti-Hindu sentiments. Kujamohan's story tries to capture this political unrest in the country at large which terrorised the Manipuris in the 1960s. This fear and panic made them long for their roots, reviving those folk memories and myths that justify this longing. In the story, a particular remark made by Tombinou hinges upon a mythologised folk narrative of return to home:

There is one saying by our elders that a day will inevitably come when we will be asked to go back to our ancestral homeland, the land of the Meiteis. It is said that we should leave neither on the first instigation nor on the last, but it is best to leave on the second instigation. And presently, it is the time of the second instigation (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 23).

(Translated from Manipuri)

The narrative of return to homeland is a basic trope of diasporic consciousness. Tombinou's words validate the presence of an "ethnic myth" (Vertovec 278) in the collective cultural narrative of the diasporic community. It bolsters the idea that the diasporic reality is a sum total of elements like feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, etc. which bind the

community to their cherished homeland (Shuval 43). While Kunjamohan's short story underscores this mythologising of the diasporic return, it also construes what happens to the East Pakistani refugees after they arrive in India. In this connection, Tombinou narrates the experience of the refugees in India:

It is true that the government of Hindustan is providing food to the groups of people who emigrated from here. But that is very meagre in amount and not enough to eradicate hunger. In an attempt to fill the stomach, many of them accidentally consumed non-eatable things and died from food-poisoning. And the lands given to them for rehabilitation are in the wilderness, in the dense hilly areas where they are made to clear the jungles and, in the process, they are exposed to many types of insect-borne diseases. (23)

(Translated from Manipuri)

The writer depicts the response given by the Indian government of 1964 in handling the refugee problem. While doing so, he very cleverly pinpoints the exact nature of struggles that the homeless migrants had to face across the border.

One problematic element that confronts the diasporic identity of the Manipuri community in East Pakistan is the question of political loyalty vis-à-vis the land of their existence. According to Steven Vertovec, diasporic identity is informed by a "tension of *political orientations*, given that diasporic peoples are often confronted with divided loyalties to homelands and host countries" (279). In other words, diasporic experience is characterised by a double consciousness in which the individual struggles in expressing with a tone of finality where they belong to. It is this double consciousness that the protagonist of Kunjamohan's story suffers from. Initially, the protagonist agrees that East Pakistan is no longer safe for the Manipuris (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 19) in the face of increasing atrocities on the religious minorities. But later, when others are talking about leaving the country for good, she shows hesitance and reluctance. When Tombinou brings the news of the abduction of three Bengali Hindu girls by the rioters and the missing of one Meetei girl, the protagonist tries to ignore or downplay the situation. She says that "everything we are hearing may also be exaggerated...they [the rioters] can't go to that extent (Translated from Manipuri)" (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 22). Having spent her lifetime in that geographical space, it is her sense of loyalty to the place that makes her committed to stay back where she is.

The protagonist's loyalty to the land of her birth, miles away from her ancestral homeland of Manipur, in effect transforms her identity, separating "what she has become" from "what her ancestors used to be." Within the cultural discourse of Stuart Hall, she has, through her strong sense of belonging to East Pakistan, acquired a new cultural identity. Hall maintains that "Cultural identities...undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (225). In the case of the protagonist as well as the other Manipuri characters in the story, their personal histories in East Pakistan and their subsequent immigration to India have inevitably given them a separate cultural identity – the identity of diasporic Manipuri emigrants.

The short story suggests that the Manipuri emigrants of East Pakistan expected to be received by the Indian government mainly on the back of their religious minority status in

East Pakistan. But although the majority of the emigrants were Hindus, with some Buddhist and Christian groups also joining the exodus, the Manipuris do not easily fall into any religious grouping. In fact, Manipuris follow a mixture of Hinduism and their traditional faith which makes them distinct from their Bengali Hindu counterparts in East Pakistan. This ethnic identity is well emphasised by Kunjamohan in his short story. On one instance, the protagonist makes this distinction very clear: "Although the rulers are Mussalmans the country belongs to the subjects. It belongs to the Mussalmans, Hindus, Meiteis, all alike (Translated from Manipuri)" (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 20). Here, she emphasises her community's ethnic identity. Although the majority of the Meiteis follow Hinduism, she avoids categorising her people as a Hindu community. Later, this distinctive Manipuri identity is shown when the protagonist and her two grandchildren pray to their household Manipuri deities, *Sanamahi* and *Leimaren*, before taking leave of their house. (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 25).

It does not seem far-fetched to argue that the notion of ethnic identity remains central to the diasporic experience of the Manipuri community in East Pakistan. The short story raises the question whether the marginalisation and oppression of the Manipuri community in East Pakistan is a result of their ethnic difference or religious identity. According to John E. Joseph, "ethnic identity is focused more on common descent and on a cultural heritage shared because of common descent, than on political aspirations for autonomy" (162). Joseph indicates that an ethnic group is more of a culturally homogeneous entity rather than a politically unified category. Accordingly, one may be curious to examine the role of ethnic identity in the formation of a state. In this connection, Gerd Baumann rather nonchalantly remarks that "ethnicity is not an identity given by nature, but an identification created through social action" (21) and therefore "Ethnic absolutism is neither politically useful nor even tenable as an analysis" (19). Kunjamohan's short story resonates the same point. The fact that the protagonist comes to accept East Pakistan as her "home" wholeheartedly, despite knowing that Bengalis form the majority, exemplifies her rejection of ethnic absolutism as the country's foundation. Thus, her idea of the state involves equal treatment of all subjects by the ruling government, irrespective of religion or ethnicity (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 20).

N. Kunjamohan's short story hinges on the basic premise that a person who is forced to leave behind their homeland suffers from the fear of two basic types of uncertainty: first, the fearful uncertainty regarding the unfamiliar host land with all its alien elements and second, the uncertainty regarding the condition of the left behind assets and belongings, such as home, material properties, land and so on. An analysis of the responses of the different characters to their condition as potential migrants reveals that the old protagonist's sense of suffering is more than that of other characters. It is seen that her neighbour, Tombinou, is practical-minded and realistic, fully alert to contemporary events in the country, while Bhaskar and Chandra are simply acting as per the demand of the situation. Tombinou's fear is mainly caused by the unknown and uncertain future in their hostland, India. Although he has come to know that refugees in the Indian rehabilitation camps are going through various hardships, he does not disclose the news to the protagonist's family because he thinks, "Only the good things need to be told. After all, it is necessary to motivate people or else they won't go" (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 23). His words indicate the idea that migratory journeys are often catalysed by a hope for a better

life, albeit such hopes are not always based on practical reality. Nonetheless, Tombinou's emphasis on the need to move out of East Pakistan at any cost exemplifies a typical emigrant's belief that the fear of the unknown future in the host country is less concerning than the fear of living amidst the hostile forces at home.

The protagonist, in contrast, is concerned about both her future destination as well as her belongings that she is going to leave behind. On the one hand, she is worried about not getting enough food to eat in the hostland, India (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 22). While on the other hand, she ruminates over her belongings which will now be taken away by others. On one particular instance her attention is fixed on their cow and the calf which were supposed to be given to her granddaughter as dowry in her marriage (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 24). Affectionately caressing them, she bids them farewell, "with drops of tear gently falling on the cow's body (Translated from Manipuri)" (Singh, *Ilisha Amagi Mahao* 24). While her gesture expresses her attachment to the animals, she may also be painfully aware, at a deeper level, that the cow and the calf will be left behind among such people who may not treat them respectfully. Her Vaishnavite upbringings might have made it difficult for her to part with the animals under such a circumstance.

Kunjamohan's story, read in its historical context, articulates an important issue that may have serious implications even in the present times—is the Manipuri diaspora a part of Indian diaspora? In their introduction to the book, *Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*, Radha S. Hegde and Ajaya K. Sahoo claim that the Indian government is politically interested in referring to all those immigrants as "Indian" who trace their origins within the currently defined borders of India (2). While this view may reflect the historically and politically shaped diplomatic stance of the central government it in no way justly addresses the identity issue of the Manipuri diaspora in East Pakistan. This is mainly due to the fact that when the Manipuri populations migrated to Sylhet in large numbers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Manipur used to be a sovereign state of South-East Asia. Since Manipur joined the Indian union only in 1949, it is problematic to term the centuries-old Manipuri diaspora in greater Sylhet or the present-day Bangladesh as Indian diaspora. Backing this idea, M.C. Arunkumar observes:

...in spite of close interaction with Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh, the Meiteis do not consider themselves as of the Indian community. Their base of identity is Manipuri Hinduism in relation with the majority Muslim. Simultaneously, their linguistic identity is distinctive from the Indian communities there ... In all practical sense, the linguistic identity is more profound in Bangladesh. The religious similarities between the Hindu Bengalis and the Meitei become secondary... (11)

It is suggested here that the Manipuris in Bangladesh do not consider themselves as of Indian origin. This viewpoint is emphasised in Kunjamohan's short story where the protagonist keeps on referring to Hindustan as a foreign country (20), while she refers to Manipur as her ancestral homeland (19).

According to James M. Rubentein, human migrations take place due to two reasons: the "push factor" that exerts pressures on people to move out of their present location, and the "pull factor" that encourages or induces people to move into a new location (81). Historically seen, the Manipuris who migrated to India during the 1964 riots can be referred to as second-time migrants. Their ancestors migrated to East Pakistan from the

Manipur kingdom mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and they migrated to India in twentieth century. In both cases, these people experienced the push factor. In that sense, India can be said to assume the role of their "third home" which is twice removed from their original home – the erstwhile sovereign state of Manipur.

Seen from the present socio-political parlance, the core feature of the Indian diaspora is its "collective imagining of India" – of emotions, links, traditions, feelings and attachments that collectively serve to sustain a psychological appeal among successive generations of emigrants for the land which has become their "mother" country (Singh, "Introduction" 4). In the case of Manipuris in the post-1947 East Pakistan, such a psychological and emotional attachment for India may not have been possible due to historical reasons. But for the succeeding generations of Manipuri migrants, especially those who are born in India, it is easier to forge an emotional tie with India. Moreover, the secular framework of the Indian constitution and the Indian tradition of embracing cultural diversity are other factors that can enable Manipuri migrants to assimilate into the Indian society smoothly.

### **Conclusion:**

The concept of diaspora and homeland vis-à-vis the political identity of Bangladeshi Manipuris appears rather complex in nature. Historically, Manipuris residing in the Sylhet district of East Bengal turned into East Pakistanis in 1947 and later they became Bangladeshi citizens in 1971. But it will also be too simplistic to term their possible migration to India as a case of returning "home." In fact, far from being a home country India remains to them a foreign country, due to the historical fact that they trace their origin to the erstwhile kingdom of Manipur, and not to the Indian state. Hence, for East Pakistani Manipuris, migrating to India is like settling in a foreign land where they have to reorganise themselves within new sets of reference and emotional allegiance. On the other hand, their true return to "home" might be possible only when or if they ever emigrate to Manipur. But it is also true that for the Manipuri community of East Pakistan the geographical as well as cultural boundaries of their ancestral homeland, Manipur, have undergone a drastic change. Similar to Salman Rushdie's imaginary homelands where a diasporic person's physical alienation from ancestral homeland leads to an inability in reclaiming precisely what was lost (10), the Manipuri community in East Pakistan could realise the stark difference between the Manipur they left behind centuries ago and the Manipur of the post-1947 era. Thus, on the whole, it may be safely assumed that N. Kunjamohan Singh's short story "Liching" depicts the ambiguous nature of homeland in the lives of the Manipuris affected by the 1964 Riots in the East Pakistan. Kunjamohan's story records the chaotic uncertainties of the diasporic experience when the trajectories of home and homeland become muddled in the waves of history and political upheavals.

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