



Conflict of Identity and Culture: A Study in Rita Choudhury's *Makam*

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Abstract

What kind of pain and agony that a native feels if his beloved country forced him to go out with the identity of illegal migrants and foreigner has been revealed through the story of *Makam*. *Makam*, a famous novel of Rita Choudhury about a group of Chinese- Assamese people of Assam, who lived at a place called Makum before the Indo-China war of 1962, which is presently a town of Tinsukia district of Assam. In this research paper we are trying to discuss the reason of their coming to this, the process of assimilation through which they tried to assimilate themselves with Assamese society and culture and considered themselves as the native of Assam, the circumstances through which they lost their identity of native and termed as "spy" by the governments and also the tragic aftermath of their separation from Assam. It is purely a literary paper and the study is solely based on the story of *Makam*.

(Key words: Culture, identity, Assimilation, separation, tragedy)

Introduction: *Makam*, a fictional document of the Chinese- Assamese people of Assam, who lived at a place called Makum before the Indo-China war of 1962, which is presently a town of Tinsukia district of Assam. The writer of this novel, Rita Choudhury is an Assamese Indian poet, novelist and Sahitya Academy Award recipient in the world of Assamese literature. In *Makam*, which is generally considered as one of the most popular and widely read novels of Rita Choudhury, She has depicted the story of Chinese- Assamese people of Makum, who were, at first, brought to India or rather Assam by British to work on the tea plantation but after the Indo-China war of 1962, forced to leave this land with the identity of Chinese Spy. Though, here in this book, only the story of a few number of those unfortunate Chinese people have brought into the light,

around fifteen hundred Chinese- Indian people witnessed that tragedy at that time and through the beautiful narrative technique and brilliant presentation of the characters we can feel the agony and pain of those people. Through this fictional book the writer has tried to bring forward the stories of those unfortunate people regarding whom the people of these days have no information and remain unaware of them. As they were considered as spies, no proper research works have been done in that context before the publication of this book and people are almost about to forget them. Whoever read this book always finds it a brilliant piece of literature which presents the tragic picture of a group of people who had left their home, property, cousins or relatives (even wife and husband, mother and father, brother and sister, children and mother have been separated) only because of their physical similarity with the Chinese people.

Objective: The objective of this paper is to discuss the agony, pain. Struggle and tragedy of those unfortunate Chinese Assamese people who had to leave this country with the identity of Chinese Spy, the country whom most of them had never visited and knew nothing about the Chinese language or culture.

Methodology: What kind of pain and agony that a native feels if his beloved country forced him to go out with the identity of illegal migrants and foreigner has been revealed through the story of *Makam*. To prepare this paper we have used the text of the novel *Makam* as the primary source and also took the help of secondary sources like reference book, internet etc. Most of the time, the points have been taken from the book *Makam* itself, as this research paper is basically centered on the story of that book.

Discussion- Though *Makam* is a piece of fiction, the story of this novel creates a realistic impression on our minds. As the writer herself reveals the fact, "most of the characters of this novel are the real characters and some characters are being developed to represent all types of people of that society. In case of some of the characters real names and the name of the places they used to live are mentioned realistically. Whereas, in case of some of the characters, identities have been changed" (*Makam*, Page-604). Now a day also, at Makum, Chinese Assamese people can be seen which reminds us about their presence at that place some decades ago. By sharing her experiences, the writer herself said that when she visited various places and met many persons to collect the information for this novel, they gaze at her with wonder and disbelief as they heard the reason of her searching for them. It was a hard task for her to won their heart and collect primary data for this book. As they are labeled as Chinese Spy after the Indo-China war of 1962, it became very hard for them to live here freely as they used to live here earlier and spend their lives in suppression and in midst of an atmosphere of suspect.

When we read this novel, our hearts fill with the tragedy and misfortune of these Chinese Assamese people. Lots of issues and things aroused in our minds and in this research paper an attempt has been made to discuss those issues under five sub- headings like assimilation, identity, suspect, separation and tragedy.

Assimilation: Right after the start of tea plantation in Assam by British, they were in need of labour. The people of Assam did the cultivation in their own lands and were not desired to work for the British in jungle. Again, though some of them came to work, the absence of labour gave them the chance to demand more prices from British. To solve this problem, the British tea planters initially look for the Chinese labourers.

British felt that, every Chinese people are well aware of tea plantation and as the Chinese tea, at that time, were in high demand in the market. So, only the Chinese labour could make the tea of Assam eligible for the international market. Due to a famine at that time in China, it was very easy for the brokers to tempt the poor Chinese to come to India and make good fortune by working here. For example in this novel a broker tells the Chinese people, "what is not there in that country? It can be said that gold can be found everywhere there. And what we have here? Do we get the chance to eat properly after doing so much hard work? Do we get the chance to live here happily? We don't. If the disaster of flood is over than famine comes. There is only war and death here" (*Makam*, Page- 56). Some of them believed those brokers and came to India with them. They were brought to India by those brokers in a very unhealthy condition in ship and a good number of workers even died in the midst of sea and the brokers used to throw their dead bodies to the sea. When they arrived here, they were sent to the different places to work in the tea gardens. At first, they for their own country for their own people. But when they realized that they would never be able to return to their country they began to learn language and culture of this land. Thus, the process of assimilation between these Chinese and local people get started.

The Chinese laborers were very good at work; both in physical as well as in technical work. After a few years, workers from other parts of India were also brought by British to work on the tea plantation of Assam. At that time, in the tea gardens, separate lines (rows of houses) were made for the workers and officials and the members of one line was not allowed to visit the other line. But for the Chinese laborers, British allotted some separate houses and allowed them to visit both the "lines". So, they had good connection with both officers as well as the workers. When these Chinese labours became economically sound enough through their hard labour some of these Chinese workers started their own business and became rich with the changing scenario of time. They used to speak the language of this land and adopted the culture of local people. They married girls from the various communities of Assam and observed the Assamese culture in their marriages. For example, we can mention the marriage of Pulak and Mailin. The local people also participated in Chinese festival as we witnessed in the novel that young Assamese lads of Makum used to visit the Chinese people during Chinese New Year festival. Only one Chinese school was there at Makum and some Chinese children also took their education at Assamese medium school. In sports also, there was no division called Chinese or Assamese but the boys from both the communities played for the same club. Though their culture and physical appearance were somewhat different from each other, they shared the same emotions for this land. This point is clearly traceable when after the banishment of these Chinese people from Assam, many of them died with one desire only. And that was to visit their beloved Makum once. So, we can say that in case of these Chinese Assamese people, the process of assimilation was never determined by colour or race rather it was developed on the basis of same emotions that they had with them for this land.

Identity: When British brought these Chinese labourers to Assam, they came with Chinese identity. But when they started to work here in Assam, it was necessary for them to learn the language and culture of Assam. With the passing time, the later generations were greatly affected by the environment and culture of

this place and gradually they developed the Chinese Assamese identity. Though in case of physical appearance they had some resemblances with the Chinese people, by their heart they were the Assamese. They participated in the Assamese festivals and also invited the Assamese people to join their festivals. They could not forget this land even after their banishment from India. In China, the government provided the separate camps to them, restricted their activities and prevented them from learning anything except the communist ideologies. In those camps also, they practiced Assamese language and culture and wife of Pulak Boruah, Mailin Boruah taught Assamese letters and songs to her daughter and an Assamese song of Jayanta Hazarika was sang by Lailin (daughter of Mailin) in a public programme. As mentioned in the novel, even after so many years of banishment of these Chinese people from Assam, still some of their children used to come to Assam to see their relatives and family members who didn't go to China with their other relatives.

Suspect: It is the Indo-China war of 1962 which brought the atmosphere of suspect and disbelief to the lives of Chinese Assamese people. Before that war they lived freely as like any other people of Assam but when in 1962 China attacked India, a rapid change came into their lives. They were afraid of roaming outside freely as the mindset of some of the local people got changed towards them. The initial defeat of Indian army in the hand of Chinese made the condition worse for them. Even the local administration didn't help them. Instead, they considered them as the Chinese Spy and appointed some local people to have an eye on them. This atmosphere of suspect created the feeling of depression in the minds of Chinese Assamese people. Most of them were the daily workers and had nothing to do with the war. But their only problem was their physical appearance, on which they couldn't do anything. It was not their fault that they lived here and by forgetting their own language and culture they adopted local language and culture. It was the demand of the circumstances. In fact, when we read about their condition in this novel, we feel that they're only the puppet of destiny who played a very tragic game with them. Interestingly, they were suspected not only in India but after their return to China same thing happened with them in the overseas camps of China. They were forced to do all the hard works in the firms with which they were not accustomed to. And if they exhibited a little protest against the authority they were beaten very badly tortured mentally by the appointed authority of communist government of China. One such victim was Liang who stood in front of them to support his pregnant wife and the communist leaders considered this as an act of revolt against communism. While these overseas Chinese we're beaten the communist leaders asked them to confess about their senders. Another character Ting Ling Yang committed suicide as he was unable to bear the kind of physical and mental torture which they insisted upon him. In this way, these Chinese Assamese people became the victim of suspect in both the countries; in India as well as in China.

Separation: At first they get assimilated with local people and environment of Assam and they developed a Chinese Assamese identity. Then they became the subject of suspect and as a result of that they get separated from this land, from their relatives. In 1962, the police had arrested only those people who had physical resemblances with the Chinese people. But the fact is that, most of these Chinese Assamese people married girls from various communities of Assam or rather Indian. For example, a lady called Pramila Gogoi lived

with her husband for 35 years and just because her husband was a Chinese, they had to leave this country. The newly married Marlin get separated from her husband and had to depart for China even during her pregnancy just because she had a physical structure similar to those of Chinese people. Both of them had to live in two separate countries. Mokmin, a rich shopkeeper of Makum, had to travel for China with empty hand as the Indian government didn't allow him to carry anything from this country and regarded the property of Chinese people as the enemy property. Even those Indian origin wives who went to China with their husbands and children they never got the chance to return here and spent their whole life by remembering their relatives and places. They were not separated only from their relatives, from their property or from this land but they were also separated from their Assamese identity. At first their ancestors were separated from their Chinese identity and adopted a new Chinese Assamese identity when they came to India in search of work and in 1962 their grandchildren became the subject of forced Separation and compelled to took the Chinese identity again by leaving that Chinese Assamese identity.

Tragedy: *Makam* is a sort of novel where we can feel the tragedy right from the beginning of the novel up to its end. In the beginning, when Arunabh meets Lailin, she wanted to avoid him as he was an Assamese or rather Indian. At her home, her mother speaks Assamese, like to taste Assamese food more than the Chinese and Lailin always finds an objection in that. She was unaware about the amount of tragedy she had been carrying in her heart throughout the years. Then when the story of Chinese people in China in early half of the 19th century was described than we got the information that a poor father had to sold his two daughters and four sons for some rupees and a few sack of rice. The condition of Chinese labour at that time in China was very terrible and they were just became the private property of their owners who used them according to their wish. And when these Chinese labours were brought in ship to India to work in the tea plantation, many of them died in those ships due to the lack of food, medicine and mental depression.

Despite of all these troubles in their life, they didn't lose the hope of their life and settled here in Assam and get assimilated with the local people. But here also destiny once again deprived them and compelled them to leave this land with the identity of Chinese Spy. They had to leave everything, even their identity also and returned to China with a new Identity, called overseas Chinese. They had to forget all the memories of their life which they spent here in Assam. Marlin, a poor unfortunate overseas Chinese mother had to marry a Chinese man (despite having a husband here in Assam) for a good future of her daughter. It is not possible to describe the tragedy of every character but one thing is certain that most of the characters of this novel had to experience the tragedy of Separation and the agony of homeless and country less people.

Conclusion: *Makam*, a novel where we read the story of a good number of people, whose lives were severely affected by the changing relationship of China and India. When Indian leaders had a good relationship with Chinese leaders before India's independence, the condition of Chinese people in India were very good. But their condition was also changed with the changing scenario of relationship between India and China during the time of 1962's Indo-China war. We'll not comment on the relationship between these two countries but one thing is sure that due to the hostile relationship between these two nations', these Chinese Assamese people of Makum had to suffer. Without having any fault of them, they became the puppet of destiny and had to suffer a lot.

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