

Voices from the Frontlines: A Comparative Study of North-eastern Insurgency in India and Bangladesh's War of Independence (1971)

Nadeem Ahmad Rather

Abstract

The North-eastern insurgency in India and the Bangladesh war of Independence (1971), which resulted in the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan, are considered two of the most devastating occurrences in South Asia, causing countless fatalities and incalculable losses in property. Since India's independence in 1947, the North-east region has been plagued by a proliferation of separatist conflicts and violent uprisings. Although the motives and objectives behind these movements have evolved over time, the pursuit of a unified homeland has consistently remained a ubiquitous motif unifying them. Similarly, a series of egregious and prejudicial practices inflicted by West Pakistan on East Pakistan catalysed the latter's aspiration for autonomy, culminating in a tumultuous struggle against its authoritarian rule. However, what remains unaddressed in these overarching narratives are the perspectives of those who lived or who live through the conflict: families, rebels, and marginalized groups such as women and children. A deeper understanding of war and insurgency can only be achieved by examining these voices, which are often ignored by the mainstream media. Therefore, this paper aims to critically analyze two literary works that provide perspectives from all crucial stakeholder groups, exploring themes of conflict, autonomy, accountability, and sacrifice. By examining familial bonds, affection, obligation, cultural hegemony, ethnicity, and the integrity of both the rebels and the oppressors, this study seeks to conduct a comparative analysis of these texts, building upon the premise that they offer unique insights into the complex nature of these events.

Keywords: Insurgency, War and Freedom, Family, Love and duty, Identity, Otherness, Academia, Trauma.

Introduction

North-east Insurgency

Covering nearly an area of 2,62,179 square km, North-east India comprises the seven contiguous states of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh, besides a new inclusion in the form of Sikkim. The region shares an international border with countries like China, Bangladesh, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, and Bhutan. Its connectivity to mainland India is facilitated via a thin strip of land known as the "chicken neck." Besides, the North-east region is a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups who have immigrated or migrated to this region from different parts of the world and at various historical periods. As a result, the region boasts a rich cultural tapestry, with a range of distinct communities belonging to different racial groups, speaking diverse languages and practicing distinct customs and traditions.

Since India's independence in 1947, the North-east region has been plagued by a proliferation of separatist conflicts and violent uprisings. Although the motives and objectives behind these movements have evolved over time, the pursuit of a unified homeland has

consistently remained a ubiquitous motif unifying them.¹ These sub-national movements, therefore, can be viewed as a manifestation or a response to the Indian State's hegemonic and oppressive approach towards its attempts to assimilate the ethnic groups in the North-east. The State, by disregarding the unique cultural, historical, linguistic, societal, religious, and class differences among these groups, portrays them as a homogenous entity with the same needs as the rest of mainland India. In an effort to enhance the "legitimacy of the system," the State endeavours to promote a "unifying sense of symbols, history, and purpose," with the ultimate aim of forging a singular national identity, State, and homeland.²

Nonetheless, despite the efforts made by the State to restructure and define social space as part of the national territory, the people of the North-east region maintain a strong attachment to the idea of a homeland. This attachment is evident in their persistent struggle, rooted in a multi-ethnic region where the preservation of individual identity is perceived to be at risk under assimilation. In this light, Chatterjee critiques the notion of a unified Indian nationalism and argues that there are multiple "coexisting national voices" or "fragments," including those of "women, peasants, the elite, castes, and outcasts," each with its own distinct discourse.³ This is why both civil society and insurgent groups in the North-east jointly question the validity of Indian nationhood by contrasting it with the state of affairs in the pre-independence era when the region was comprised of several independent entities governed in various forms.⁴ The underlying motive behind this collective challenge is driven by a deep sense of loyalty to protect their culture, assert their dominance over other groups, and preserve their distinct identity, which often leads to intense ethnic confrontations.

Academic and political analysts have approached the study of the North-eastern insurgency conflict with a variety of analytical frameworks and perspectives. A cohort of intellectuals, such as T .S Murthy in his work *Assam: The Difficult Years - A Study of Political Developments in 1979-1983* (1983), Amalendu Guha in *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947* (1977) and Hiren Gohain's *Assam: A Burning Question* (1985), delve into the theme of insurgency by considering the impact of 'migratory' patterns on the region. Their insightful research places emphasis on British colonialism as the root cause of migration and the subsequent formation of communal identities among tribal communities in Assam. The demand for labour in British Assam brought about a continuous influx of migrants from Bengal and other nearby areas, causing apprehension among the local population about being relegated to secondary status in their own homeland. This fear of marginalization gave rise to the formation of a new identity among these various ethnic groups, ultimately leading to insurgency movements and ethnic conflicts.

In contrast, Sanjib Baruah, among other analysts, examines the role of 'language politics' in driving the insurgency and ethnic movements in North-east India. The imposition of the Bengali language on the native population resulted in the fragmentation of the diverse cultural landscape. Over time, the indigenous people harboured negative sentiments towards the Bengali migrants, perceiving them as exerting control over every aspect of their lives, including the social, cultural, economic, and political domains. Subsequently, these movements evolved into a struggle for the acknowledgement and validation of their local languages and

Nadeem Ahmad Rather is a research scholar at Indian Institute of Technology, Jammu (India).

¹ Leishipem Khamrang, "Geography of Insurgency—Contextualization of Ethno-Nationalism in Northeast India," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 6 (2015), p.104.

² Rafiul Ahmed, "Contesting Geo-Bodies and Rise of Sub Nationalism in North-East India: A Case Study of Nagas and Khasis" (PhD Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2009), p. 7.

³ Ahmed, "Contesting Geo-Bodies and Rise of Sub Nationalism in North-East India," p. 35.

⁴ Khamrang, "Geography of Insurgency," p. 104.

dialects. As Udayon Misra asserts that the “growth of Assamese nationalism has been inextricably tied up with the question of official recognition of the Assamese language.”⁵

According to Marxist theorists, the root cause of the conflict in the North-east region is attributed to the underdevelopment and class fragmentation resulting from the colonial policies implemented by the central government. These researchers assert that the ethnic tensions in the region are perpetuated by the pre-existing privileged elites, who compete to shape the political and institutional systems to their advantage, with the ultimate goal of securing greater prosperity and progress. The conflict is thus viewed within the framework of clashing interests among ethnic groups, each seeking to assert dominance and control over the region’s resources.

Literary practitioners of the region have tackled a plethora of subjects in their literary works, including but not limited to immigration, cultural estrangement, racial tensions, violence, crises of self-identity, and political and economic issues. Despite the diversity of subject matter, the recurrent presence of conflict serves to create a harmonious sense of discord throughout their oeuvre. In addition to challenging the dominant discourse and representing marginalized perspectives, these authors also aim to infuse the collective imagination of their homeland through their literary creations.⁶

An examination of the studies mentioned above and methodologies employed to analyse the North-east insurgency reveals a predominant focus on contextualizing the conflict through historical, linguistic, class, political, and economic lenses. This approach, while significant in establishing the identity of insurgent groups, has limited the discourse on the Northeast insurgency to these dichotomies and has failed to address a host of unresolved questions. The focus of these overarching narratives often neglect the human element and the personal experiences of those impacted by the insurgency, such as families, rebels, and marginalized groups such as women, and children. By giving voice to these individuals, a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the insurgency can be gained. As noted by Desai (2020), the stories of these individuals, who are frequently ignored by mainstream media, are crucial in filling the gaps left by conventional approaches.⁷ For this reason, I have chosen to examine this issue through the lens of the offbeat narrative, *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* (2020) by Aruni Kashyap, to explore the problem from multiple angles.

The book is a meticulously curated compilation of fifteen narratives, edited by Aruni Kashyap, a preeminent figure in the realm of Assamese literature. These stories, originally written in Assamese, Bodo, and English, “attempt to humanize the longstanding” and often brutal conflict in North-east India, “that the rest of India knows of only through facts and figures or reports in newspapers and on television channels.”⁸ The stories within the compilation traverse a plethora of themes such as love, family, home, insurgency, freedom, sacrifice, and self-identity, offering multifarious perspectives that range from those of insurgents, parents, police officers, siblings, and children. This not only adds depth to the authenticity and credibility of the narratives but also provides a comprehensive picture of the complex and nuanced nature of the conflict. The focus of the text lies on ‘individual stories’ and their interactions with the environment. By bringing the reader into close proximity with the lived realities of the conflict, *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* goes beyond merely

⁵ Udayon Misra, *India’s Northeast: Identity Movements, State and Civil Society* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 173.

⁶ Priyanka Kakoti, *English Writings from Northeast India: Of Inclusions, Exclusions and Beyond* (United Kingdom, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

⁷ Madhura Desai, “Book Review: How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency,” *The Literary Circle*, October 25, (2020). At: theliterarycircle.com/book-review-how-to-tell-the-story-of-an-insurgency/. Accessed 31/07/2023.

⁸ Aruni Kashyap, “Book Review: *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*,” *ARUNI KASHYAP*, (2020). At: arunikashyap.com/how-to-tell-the-story-of-an-insurgency-editor. Accessed 31/07/2023.

chronicling events and instead seeks to provide an insightful and empathetic perspective on the human dimension of the conflict.

Bangladesh War of Independence

The examination of the events leading up to East Pakistan's (present-day Bangladesh) fight for independence in 1971 uncovers certain contributing factors that are analogous to those observed in the North-eastern insurgency. After the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, East Pakistan, an area largely composed of Muslims, was incorporated into Pakistan's jurisdiction. This resulted in the formation of a nation consisting of two Muslim-majority regions: one in the East, known as East-Pakistan, and another in the West, known as West-Pakistan, separated in between by the vast Indian territory. However, over time, the West started to exhibit a colonial attitude towards the East, causing a rift between the two regions despite their shared religious foundations. The condescending and paternalistic behaviour by West Pakistan towards East Pakistan reached a boiling point, leading to the initiation of a full-scale independence movement in the form of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

The administration, headquartered in the West, engaged in a pernicious exploitation of the economic situation in East Pakistan. Despite East Pakistan contributing a greater share to the generation of revenue, resources were apportioned unevenly between the two regions, with the East's resources being depleted and utilized solely for the development of the West. Furthermore, the representation of East Pakistanis in administration and governance was marginal, tailored to serve the interests of the Western elite who did not hesitate to commit acts of injustice against the Eastern population. East Pakistanis were deemed unworthy of holding higher positions in government, leading to a destruction of their self-esteem and pride.

In the second place, central government's (West Pakistan) decision to impose Urdu as the official language of Pakistan sounded an alarm for the East Pakistanis, who perceived this move as a threat to their own unique culture and language, Bengali. They recognized that if they failed to safeguard their culture and language from the aggression of the West Pakistan administration, they would become extinct. Hence, it was this persistent political, economic, linguistic and social exploitation that the East Pakistanis were subjected to prior to their eventual independence and serves as a testament to the struggle and sacrifices made in the name of self-determination. Nevertheless, the narratives surrounding the independence of Bangladesh, much like the North-eastern insurgency, are bereft of the invaluable perspective provided by individual voices. This absence of personal accounts impairs our comprehension of the intricacies and tribulations experienced by individuals in these tumultuous situations. Therefore, to address this gap, Tahmima Anam's novel *A Golden Age* (2007) has been chosen as another text to analyse the Bangladesh War of Independence and its parallels with the North-east insurgency. Through its central protagonist Rehana's voice, the reader gains an intimate understanding of the thoughts, emotions, and motivations of an individual caught up in the historical events of the era.

Tahmima Anam's literary work *A Golden Age*, is a thought-provoking narrative that delves into the intricacies of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. The story, which is told from the perspective of Rehana Haque, a woman, highlights the centrality of love, family, emotions, and sacrifice, and how these themes intersect with larger issues of violence, turmoil, self-identity, and otherness. Through a nuanced exploration of its characters, the novel illuminates the nature and essence of revolution, the iniquity of oppression, and the difficult choices that individuals must make in times of uncertainty.

Now building upon the premise that the two primary texts delve into themes of conflict, autonomy, accountability, and sacrifice, this paper endeavours to conduct a comparative analysis of the works through the lens of familial bonds, affection, obligation, cultural hegemony, ethnicity, and the integrity of both the rebels and the oppressors.

The Resemblances between the two texts.

Although distinct authors created the two texts in separate time periods depicting two disparate wars, they bear numerous striking similarities.

Concepts of Family, Love and Duty in the Time of War

The familial bond and attachment among family members constitute an essential component of any family structure, particularly the emotional closeness during tumultuous times of conflict, where individuals are incessantly subjected to the shaping, invasion, and surveillance by war-related institutions. The capacity of family members to perform and endure inconceivable and arduous actions in the name of safeguarding and supporting their beloved ones supersedes any philosophical musings regarding higher truths. Instead, the focus shifts toward the tangible actions and obligations an individual owe to their family. The love and commitment displayed by family members towards one another serves to fortify the solidarity of the family unit, providing a source of comfort and hope in the midst of strife. Anawat Bunnag posits that Confucius believed in a conception of “benevolent love” that prioritizes one’s “duty, actions, and attitudes” within relationships, rather than solely focusing on the emotion of love itself.⁹ This sense of duty is directed towards the parents, siblings and other institutions to which a person may belong. David M. Schneider conceptualizes love as a phenomenon that “must be expressed or represented by some act which is its sign but is not it.”¹⁰ In the face of moments of political unrest, such as war or insurgency, families find themselves embroiled in a complex web of duties and allegiances that pose a formidable challenge in negotiating their relationships with both rebel groups and enemies. This creates a dichotomy of loyalties that exacerbates the already intricate dynamic of navigating the ramifications of political unrest. Conversely, for rebels, love serves as an assertion of autonomy, signifying a rejection of imposed norms and a declaration of allegiance to a chosen community. Ken MacLeish observes that in such instances, “love” transforms into a “gesture of sovereignty.”¹¹

The intricacies of familial love are intricately woven into the tapestry of *A Golden Age* and *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*. *A Golden Age* showcases the tender affection a bereaved mother has for her offspring, while *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* explores the deep-seated love between family members for a son or sibling who has joined the militant ranks, as well as the sacrifices made by militants in their devotion to their homeland. These works offer a nuanced perspective on love, moving beyond the traditional romantic trope to illuminate the complex and multidimensional nature of affection within familial relationships. The texts evoke the image of a selfless parent who endures arduous tribulations and emotional distress to preserve the well-being of their offspring.

Unmatched devotion blooms amidst the chaos of war in *A Golden Age*. Set against the backdrop of Bangladesh’s fight for freedom against Pakistan in 1971, a mother’s love for her children shines as a beacon of hope and unwavering strength. The author has masterfully crafted the narrative such that the conflicting emotions of love and responsibility are

⁹ Anawat Bunnag, “The Concept of Love in Philosophy: A Comparative Study between Plato’s and Chinese Philosophy Part III: Mozi (Mo-Tzu) and the Universal Love,” *Cultural Anthropology EJournal* 4, no. 134 (2019), p. 47.

¹⁰ David M. Schneider, *American Kinship a Cultural Account* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 61.

¹¹ Ken MacLeish, “Vicissitudes of Love: Feeling the Iraq War in a Military Community.” (PhD, University of Texas, 2009), p. 15.

consistently in tension, yet never at odds with one another.¹² The narrative's opening highlights the distress of motherhood through the portrayal of Rehana's loss of guardianship over her offspring to her brother-in-law. This poignant depiction of Rehana's separation from her children accentuates the intense emotions associated with maternal love and elicits a sense of anguish. The tribulation of relinquishing her children imbues Rehana with a sense of urgency, enabling her to undertake any endeavors necessary to secure the well-being and safety of her children. The author, according to Theo Chapman, "does not dwell on the brutalities of war; love is the dominant theme: love of country, parental love, sibling love... and the ties between love and sacrifice."¹³ Rehana's indefatigable perseverance and sacrifice are aimed at protecting her children from the numerous perils wrought by the war-ravaged surroundings of East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). However, she faces a challenging situation as she strives to protect her children from being caught up in the conflict. Despite her love and loyalty towards her children, she is torn between her desire to grant them their desires and her drive to keep them safe. As she grapples with this tough decision, Rehana reflects on her internal conflict, "There was a part of" me "that wanted to allow children anything – any whimsy, any zeal, any excess," while "another part of" me "wanted them to have nothing to do with it all, to keep them safe at home."¹⁴

Rehana's love and responsibilities as a mother are redefined when her children Sohail and Maya, despite her initial reservations, join the fight for a noble cause - to liberate their homeland from the authoritarian clutches of Western Pakistan. This move prompts her to expand her role from a caretaker to a key player in the resistance movement, leveraging her maternal instincts to aid escaping refugees and covertly store weapons within her home. Thus, family bonds evolve into a steadfast loyalty to the cause of national liberation. The narrative of Rehana serves as a testament to the devastating effects of imperialism, which gives rise to a pronounced power imbalance between the colonizing force and the colonized population. This leads to a situation where the colonized must negotiate their relationships with both the colonizer and their own community to ensure their survival. The war presents Rehana with a challenging tripartite dilemma, forcing her to navigate the competing demands of national allegiance, relationships with rebel factions, and personal security from hostile forces. This dichotomy of loyalties, which Rehana Haque experiences in *A Golden Age*, is prevalent in current global events, such as the ongoing conflict in Syria and the recent political unrest in Myanmar, where individuals and families are similarly faced with similar challenges.

Just like Rehana in *A Golden Age* embodies the epitome of a protective parent, undergoing a lot of turmoil and psychological anxiety to safeguard her children from any outside danger or threat, the narratives in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* illuminate the plight of families who endure unyielding stress "because one member of the family is a militant."¹⁵ This affiliation casts a shadow of doubt and insecurity over their daily lives because they "inhabit a zone of emergency where the personal is endlessly entangled with the political."¹⁶ As poignantly noted by Bhattacharya, "families of such revolutionaries had to

¹² Mohammad Moniruzzaman Miah, "Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*: A Family Saga of Love, Duty and Identity against the Backdrop of War," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 9, no. 2 (2020) p. 74.

¹³ Theo Chapman, "Love Conquers against a Background of War," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 July (2012), At: smh.com.au/entertainment/books/love-conquers-against-a-background-of-war-20120721-22gba.html. Accessed 31/07/2023.

¹⁴ Miah, "Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*," p. 131

¹⁵ Desai, "Book Review: *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*."

¹⁶ Ajitabh Hazarika, "Telling Travails from a History Reduced to Footnotes: Aruni Kashyap (ed.), *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency: Fifteen Tales from Assam*, *Cafe Dissensus Magazine*, 29 August (2020). At: cafedissensususeveryday.com/2020/08/29/telling-travails-from-a-history-reduced-to

sacrifice for the cause, even if it meant loss of life.”¹⁷ In conflict situations, individuals who are perceived to be associated with rebel groups are often targeted for retaliation by opposing forces. This is particularly true for the family members of rebels, who are always seen as potential sources of information or as sympathizers of the militant cause. This results in frequent raids, interrogations, and even physical violence directed toward family members. Moreover, sexual violence is utilized as a means of asserting dominance and control over individuals and communities perceived to be affiliated with rebel factions. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to these atrocities, ranging from rape to sexual slavery, while men and boys tend to endure physical violence, including beatings and torture. These acts of violence serve as instruments of war, wielded to humiliate, punish, and exert authority. Meanwhile, physical violence is employed as a form of retribution and to extract false confessions from individuals suspected of involvement in the insurgency.

The tale of Katindra Swargiary’s ‘Hongla Pandit’ is a poignant exemplar of the hardships and intimidation faced by the families of insurgents. The family unit is often caught in the crosshairs of political conflict, and in such cases, they are subjected to immense psychological, emotional, and physical duress. Hongla Pandit depicts a father who has made substantial sacrifices for his son’s education and future success, but despite his efforts, the son decides to join a militant group. The fateful choice not only obliterates Hongla Pandit’s aspirations for his son’s future but also renders him and his daughter, Delaisri, susceptible to the harassment and brutality perpetuated by military forces. Tragically, this leads to a horrific outcome in which Delaisri is raped by military personnel and Hongla Pandit is subjected to violent physical battering for allegedly providing refuge to the militant. The aftermath of these events is a life characterized by fear and unpredictability, marked by the constant threat of raids and interrogations.

Similarly, the “Stone People” chronicles the protagonist’s arduous journey as she endeavours to traverse the difficulties that arise in the wake of her sibling’s enlistment in a militant group. This odyssey entails a multitude of tribulations in her life, such as the perilous quest to locate her missing brother, the arduous task of reconciling her various responsibilities, such as household chores and familial obligations, as well as the formidable challenge of protecting her family from the dual perils posed by both the police and military forces. In fact, the title itself evokes the metaphor of individuals being reduced to mere statues, unable to feel anything but an innate longing for their children, who have either suffered death or have been forcibly separated from their families. Her lamentation, “When people took to the streets to agitate, my father roamed the streets in search of his son,”¹⁸ attests to the notion that existence becomes a form of living death in the face of physical and emotional anguish.

In ‘The Vigil,’ by Jahnavi Barua, on the other hand, we are privy to a masterful exploration of the intricate emotional landscape of a mother grappling with the dichotomous loyalty demanded of her by her two sons, one of whom is a police officer and the other an insurgent. She walks a tightrope while navigating the treacherous waters of maintaining a covert connection with her insurgent son, while concurrently upholding a façade of normalcy. The liberation movement, which could have served as a beacon of hope for the mother, instead exacerbates her situation, trapping her in a vicious cycle from which death may well prove the only escape.

footnotes-aruni-kashyap-ed-how-to-tell-the-story-of-an-insurgency-fifteen-tales-from-assam/. Accessed 31/07/2023.

¹⁷ Prasanthi Ram, “Tiny Sparrows in a Dark Forest: The Voices of Assam,” *Singapore Unbound*, 21 April (2020). At: singaporeunbound.org/blog/2020/3/24/tiny-sparrows-in-a-dark-forest-the-voices-of-assam. Accessed 31/07/2023.

¹⁸ Manikuntala Bhattacharya, “Stone People,” in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, ed. Aruni Kashyap (India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 145.

Therefore, during tumultuous periods marked by conflict and unrest, the notion of love and familial ties are frequently manipulated to serve the self-serving agendas of various entities, ranging from rebel factions to military forces acting in the name of so-called national interests. The texts evoke a sense of empathy and pathos in readers by drawing attention to the often-silenced voices of individuals, illuminating the ways in which love and obligation are transformed into emblematic gestures of familial devotion and allegiance. It is at once both fascinating and heart-wrenching to witness the intersection of these two seemingly disparate forces.

Notions of Identity

Identity is widely acknowledged as a crucial indicator in assessing the potency and longevity of insurgent movements within cultures and nations undergoing conflict. The notion of identity has gained substantial prominence in the realm of postcolonial studies, particularly in regards to the pressing need for third world countries to establish their distinctiveness as sovereign nations and break free from the shackles of historical and cultural oppression. Nevertheless, identity is a complex and intricate phenomenon. It isn't as straightforward and simple as it is commonly perceived. Instead, it is a continuously evolving process that is never truly complete, and it is always being constructed and reconstructed through representation.¹⁹ A person's identity is a composite construct shaped by a confluence of self-perception and interactions with various societal and organizational entities. As a member of a particular cultural and social community, characterized by features such as language, culture, race, religion, and so on, a person's identity is inherently dynamic, undergoing continuous modifications and revisions over time. This is why identity, as articulated by Michael Bamberg (2014), a preeminent psychologist and narratologist, is described as an attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory.²⁰

As time progresses, the individual identity assimilates the collective identity, fostering a robust sense of affiliation to the group. This fervent 'sense of belonging' as noted by Yolanda Williams and Jennifer Levitas can become so overpowering that it may overtake other elements of the individual's identity.²¹ Marcela Ribetti²² underscores the significance of this sense of belonging, stating that it is a key factor in an individual's decision to join and remain within an insurgent organization, despite the difficult challenges they may have to face. Thus, identity formation is a crucial aspect in the achievement of successful revolutionary collective action. As Jan Pospisil and Barbara Gruber observe, in the midst of conflict, identity is often perceived through the lens of "ethnicity, nationality, linguistic diversity, and religious difference"²³ The destabilization of identity during times of conflict can result in a crisis, where previously held notions of fixity, coherence, and stability are disrupted by the emergence of doubt and

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 222.

²⁰ Michael Bamberg, "Identity and Narration," in Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (eds), *Handbook of Narratology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

²¹ Yolanda Williams and Jennifer Levitas, "What is Collective Identity? - Definition, Theory & Examples," *Study.com*, 17 February (2016). At: study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-collective-identity-definition-theory-examples.html. Accessed 31/07/2023.

²² Marcella Ribetti, "The Unveiled Motivations of Violence in Intra-State Conflicts: The Colombian Guerrillas," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 4 (2007).

²³ Barbara Gruber and Jan Pospisil, "'Ser Eleno': Insurgent Identity Formation in the ELN," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 2 (2015) p. 5

uncertainty.²⁴ Consequently, the questioning of an individual's or group's identity can give rise to paradoxical and tumultuous outcomes.

The examination of the two texts elucidates the complex phenomenon of identity turmoil, arising from a plethora of circumstances such as immigration and refuge, linguistic disparities, assimilation into the dominant culture, and the exploitation of economic and cultural aspects.

Identity in *A Golden Age*

The systemic subjugation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, as elucidated in the introductory section, resulted in the establishment of a hierarchical cultural dynamic characterized by a skewed allocation of administrative, military, and economic resources. This, in turn, gave rise to Bengali nationalism, which gradually gained momentum and eventually blossomed into a full-fledged conflict for independence. Driven by a desire to uphold the Bengali cultural heritage and identity, numerous individuals rallied behind the independence movement. Against this backdrop of instability and conflict, the protagonist of the novel, Mrs. Rehana, finds her allegiance, commitment, and identity being called into question in this emerging nation. As she hails from an aristocratic Urdu-speaking Muslim family with roots in Calcutta, India, but later married to a West Pakistani born individual, and now residing in Dhaka, her national identity is complicated by the aftereffects of Bangladesh's War of Independence against Pakistan. In this hour of crisis, with Bangladesh and Pakistan at odds, she must rise to the formidable challenge of establishing her commitment to a land and nation that is not of her origin.

Her attempt to discourage her children from joining the fight for independence only heightens their suspicion of her commitment to the newly formed country. Nevertheless, as both of her offspring embrace the cause and join the guerrilla movement, Rehana is forced to re-examine her own sense of belonging. She begins to develop a newfound connection to Bangladesh, driven by her desire to honor her children's choices and assert her own Bengali identity. Rehana's efforts to immerse herself in the cultural, social, political, and emotional fabric of war-torn Bangladesh can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to construct her own identity as an individual. Through her engagement in the country's social life, she asserts her place in this new community, building a sense of belonging that transcends the boundaries of her birthplace and cultural roots.

Identity in *How to tell the Story of an Insurgency*

As highlighted in the introductory section, the North-east region of India is a unique and culturally rich area that is home to a wide array of diverse communities. Each of these communities has its own distinct language, traditions, and cultural practices, which form the cornerstone of their identity. However, over the years, many of these communities have become increasingly concerned about their ability to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of external forces, such as illegal migration, linguistic domination and cultural assimilation. These fears have given rise to a growing sense of anxiety among the people of North-east India and have resulted in calls for greater autonomy and the preservation of their cultural identity.

The notion of identity in the North-east is closely linked to the concept of territory. People in this region have a strong sense of belonging to their ancestral lands, and their identity is closely tied to their physical surroundings. As a result, any perceived threat to their territory is seen as a threat to their identity. In the words of Ahmed (2009), "identity" in North-east "is constructed and reconstructed in relationship to their territory and ancestral associations, as

²⁴ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 43.

people live and move through their landscapes.”²⁵ Therefore, the insurgency in the North-east is a manifestation of these deep-rooted anxieties. It is a struggle for identity and a desire to protect the cultural heritage that makes each community unique. The text in consideration delves into the intricacies of the conflict in the North-east region of India, with the aim of fostering a more profound understanding of the challenges faced by the communities there. Through a series of stories, the text underscores the significance of cultural diversity and the imperative to preserve the rich heritage of the region. By inviting readers to join the communities in their journey towards cultural preservation and identity, the text becomes part of a larger narrative of human endeavours to assert self-expression and ensure survival. The stories illustrate that the struggle for cultural preservation encompasses not only territorial and ancestral ties, but also the deeper yearning to safeguard one’s sense of self and community.

‘Maryam’s’ story in particular sheds light on the theme of identity crisis, as it portrays the anxiety of losing one’s identity through a personal experience. The birth of a child on a boat in the Brahmaputra River, shared by Bangladesh and India, symbolizes the pain and trauma of displacement and underscores the absence of a meaningful connection to a place. The narrator’s lamentation that “when the barbed wire fence came up in the early '70s, it cut right through Maryam’s home, and that of about ten others”²⁶ highlights the vulnerability of those caught in political crossfire and their struggle to retain their individuality amidst the chaotic outside world.

The portrayal of youth in various other narratives often involves their involvement in the resistance movement with the aim of safeguarding their homeland from external influences. These sub-national groups perceive these outsiders as intruders who have acquired all that was once their own, including employment, property and place of dwelling. This presents a threat to the preservation of their cultural identity, as they fear losing their cultural heritage. Supporting this assertion can be seen through the following quotes: “Finally, she spat on the ground and called him a ‘Bangladeshi pig...’²⁷ ‘I’ll do whatever I want. This is my home. These Bangladeshis have to be taught a lesson. They are taking away our land, our jobs. They are foreigners. They have to be thrown out.’²⁸

Notion of Otherness (Us vs Them Mentality).

The concept of identity is closely linked to the phenomenon of “othering,” which refers to the process of perceiving and treating someone as fundamentally different or external to one’s own identity and group. Cultural geographer Mike Crang defines othering as “a process through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship.”²⁹ This process involves the “simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the self/in-group has and the other/out-group lacks and/or some undesirable characteristic that the other/out-group has and the self/in-group lacks.” The result is the implicit establishment of “superior self/in-group and an inferior other/out-group.”³⁰ The “other” is thus portrayed as imperfect, evoking feelings of apprehension, concern, and danger. As a result, the distinction between “us” and “other” is formed based on social group standards that serve as a reflection of the self.

²⁵ Ahmed, “Contesting Geo-Bodies and Rise of Sub Nationalism in North-East India,” p. 188.

²⁶ Jayanta Saiki, “Maryam,” in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, ed. Aruni Kashyap (India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 139.

²⁷ Nitoo Das, “Charred Paper,” in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, ed. Aruni Kashyap (India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 54.

²⁸ Das, “Charred Paper,” p. 54.

²⁹ Mike Crang, *Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 61.

³⁰ Lajo L. Brons, “Othering, an Analysis,” *Transcience: A Journal of Global Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015), p. 70.

The underlying objective of this ‘in-group’ is to cultivate feelings of hatred and fear towards the designated ‘out-group’ and, thus, carry out aggressive acts against them. This urge to distinguish oneself from individuals outside the group stems, in part, from inherent “fears and ancestral predispositions, which view belonging to a tribe, a group, or family as crucial to survival.”³¹ The concept of fostering an “us” versus “them” mentality is later amplified by the masses, transforming the same homeland into a symbol of differentiation among people. The narratives in question are replete with such racial and ethnic slurs and bear testimony to the actual history.

In the novel *A Golden Age*, the colonizing powers view individuals from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds with suspicion, as they are perceived as unworthy of being true patriots of the nation. Rehana’s decision to offer her flat to a Hindu couple is met with skepticism from her own relatives, who question their trustworthiness due to their different religious beliefs. Rehana herself faces a considerable challenge in establishing her national identity, as she belongs to a country that is not her ancestral home. Her own children question her attachment to this foster land, despite her being a Muslim. However, Rehana perseveres in her efforts to demonstrate her commitment and allegiance to Bangladesh, a culturally and linguistically distinct country, by actively seeking to integrate herself into its cultural, social, political, and emotional life. Through this process, she strives to cultivate a strong sense of connection to her adoptive nation and develop her Bengali identity.

The narratives presented in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* provide the reader with a vivid representation of the manner in which communities or individuals during tumultuous times are readily characterized as being distinct. Through their examination, these accounts bring to life the poignant tales of ethnic dilemmas, exploring the ways in which “fear” is often utilized as a tool to advance particular “agendas.”³² This process frequently results in communities perceiving members of other groups as malevolent and scheming. In the specific case of the “Koli-Puran” story, the community bond is irreparably damaged. The villagers cannot save a young girl’s life, despite her community and family had a longstanding and symbiotic relationship with an Assamese village. Given that most immigrants in the northeast were Muslim, even those local to the region faced the stigma of being classified as outsiders. The exchange of dialogue between Koli and an unnamed speaker, in which the extermination of “foreigners” is celebrated, highlights the insidious nature of these narratives.

‘Bai, we won the battle! Light the kitchen fire, start cooking! We must have a feast now.’

‘What is this battle that you have won? I can’t start cooking at this hour of the night.’

‘Just you watch, Koli Bai. The country shan’t go to the dogs any more. We’ve exterminated all these foreigners.’³³

The message conveyed to these perceived “other groups,” even if they are considered “sons of the soil,” is one of undesirability and danger. The discrimination faced by such individuals, as seen through the eyes of a young girl, leads to psychological distress and decreased self-esteem.

“Our Very Own” is a tale of the human struggle to accept and understand ‘others’ in a world fraught with conflict. Through the lens of Jatin, a young man attempting to visit his friend David on Christmas, the story delves into the complexities of cultural prejudice and the ways in which it can divide communities. As Jatin is warned by both his parents and peers that a Bodo-Christian boy may have nefarious intentions, the narrative highlights the dangerous

³¹ Nayef Al-Rodhan, “Us versus Them. How neurophilosophy explains our divided politics,” *Weforum*, 3 October (2016). At: weforum.org/agenda/2016/10/us-versus-them-how-neurophilosophy-explains-populism-racism-and-extremism/. Accessed 31/07/2023.

³² Hazarika, “Telling Travails from a History Reduced to Footnotes.”

³³ Arup Kumar Nath, “Koli-Puran,” in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, ed. Aruni Kashyap (India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), p. 111.

perils of groupthink and how easily young minds can be conditioned to hold stereotypical beliefs about “our people” and “their people.”

Formation of Nationalism and Revolutionary ideology/ Role of Academia.

Education is a crucial element in catalyzing revolutionary change. As centers of higher learning, universities often serve as incubators of revolutionary fervor, nationalist sentiments, and political and social activism. This is due to the capacity of education to cultivate a heightened sense of consciousness among individuals. By fostering an appreciation of both the self and the world, education encourages individuals to scrutinize oppressive norms and policies and to assert their rights. Academia, including universities, educational institutions, and literary works, hold a significant position in imparting progressive and revolutionary ideals and awakening the spirit of nationalism among people. The North-east insurgency and Bangladesh war of Independence has seen the power of education in shaping the perspectives of young individuals, leading them towards embracing a revolutionary mindset and potentially participating in guerrilla warfare or independence efforts. Armed groups utilize a unique philosophy or ideology to draw in new recruits, which encompasses a “set of ideas” that outline the group’s constituency, the obstacles it faces, its aspirations, and an action plan.³⁴

Sohail and Maya, characters in *A Golden Age*, serve as emblematic figures of the revolutionary students of their time, actively participating in protests and political rallies against the unjust actions of the government based in West Pakistan and ultimately joining the fight for Bangladesh’s independence.³⁵ The tragedy of the Pakistani army killing thousands of people in 1971, including numerous students and professors in resident halls at Dhaka University, showcases the pivotal role educational institutions play in instilling a sense of national pride among young people. Institutions of learning were seen by the colonists as a more serious challenge to their power and dominance.

The two narratives, “Charred Paper” and “Crimson,” in the book *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency* examine the motivations behind joining separatist groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). In ‘Crimson,’ Bikram writes, “the dream of building a new Assam was served to the villagers as one serves intoxicants to eager partakers.”³⁶ Members of the group, as well as the general population, internalize the principles of the organization through consistent training and practice. The armed group attempts to resolve collective action issues through its ideological appeal, offering the villagers inspiring new ideas for change at gatherings led by ULFA members. In ‘Charred Paper,’ the author highlights ULFA’s recruitment tactics, which involved using “radical and progressive rhetoric.”³⁷ Dani, a character in the story, joins a protest march with a young child, stating that she is fighting for what is right, that is, the independence of Assam. In “Surrender,” the protagonist’s inclination towards revolution was sparked by his university education and reading Mao Zedong’s *Long March*.

The Differences between the Texts

Psychological Dilemma in A Golden Age

Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), provides a comprehensive definition of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed,

³⁴ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Ideology in Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014), p. 214.

³⁵ Miah, “Tahmima Anam’s *A Golden Age*,” 75.

³⁶ Ratnottama Das Bikram, “Crimson,” in *How to Tell the Story of an Insurgency*, ed. Aruni Kashyap (India: HarperCollins, 2020), p. 189.

³⁷ Ram, “Tiny Sparrows in a Dark Forest.”

the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”³⁸ She explains how trauma has the ability to shatter an individual’s sense of time, self, and the reality they perceive. Traumatic experiences can be so overwhelming and unexpected that the conscious mind is unable to process them fully. As a result, the effects of trauma can linger for a lifetime and manifest in various ways, such as recurrent nightmares.

Rephrase reframe in appealing academic language and avoid repeating words or ideas. Rehana’s journey in *A Golden Age* exemplifies the inner turmoil of an individual navigating a tumultuous and uncertain landscape. Struggling to protect her children while fulfilling her duties to the foster nation, Rehana faces numerous challenges and heart-wrenching setbacks. Despite facing a social, political, and legal environment that offers her little support, she courageously battles to regain custody of her children from her brother-in-law. She courageously rises to the challenge and battles alone to keep her children safe from harm. Unfortunately, her experiences during the war leave a lasting impact on her, causing her to endure painful flashbacks from the violent confrontations she encountered while accompanying her children to the university. This exposure to the impending violence in Bangladesh transforms her mentality as she witnesses the horror of dead students in university dormitories and bodies lying in the streets. Although her traumatic experiences are distressing, they serve as a catalyst for personal growth. The challenges and anxieties of war equip her with the necessary psychological fortitude to overcome obstacles and rebuild her identity as a person and citizen of a new nation.

Psychological Dilemma in How to tell the Story of an Insurgency.

In contrast to Rehana, whose traumatic experiences allowed her to gain a deeper understanding of herself, the militants struggled with the aftermath of their actions once they left their group and attempted to reintegrate into society. Due to their inability to adapt to changing circumstances, they continued to experience psychological distress. The reintegration process proved to be highly challenging for them, as they faced difficulties fitting back into society due to their past actions and the general discomfort of the people in accepting them. In Dipok and Sorukon’s cases, as seen in the works ‘Surrender’ and ‘What lies over Here,’ their unresolved trauma draws them back to violence. They become valuable pawns for the police and military, who use them as scapegoats to eliminate other members of their group. Despite their desire to reintegrate into society, they face threats from their former comrades and are trapped in a dangerous situation where they face the possibility of “certain death.”³⁹

Dimensions/ Factors Responsible for the Situation

The origins of the North Eastern insurgency are far more complex and multifaceted compared to the liberation war of Bangladesh. While the economic exploitation of East Pakistan by West Pakistan, unequal representation in the Pakistani civil service and military, and a lack of political influence for East Pakistanis all played a role in the creation of Bangladesh, the North Eastern insurgency stems from a region with a diverse array of ethnic groups who felt that their cultural identity was at risk of being eroded through assimilation. The persistent influx of migrants from neighbouring regions into the North-east added to the sense of insecurity among the indigenous people, who feared becoming outsiders in their own land. In addition, a lack of economic progress, feelings of isolation and exploitation, demographic shifts, outside support, and internal displacement all contributed to the formation of insurgent movements in the North East aimed at preserving cultural identity.

³⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11

³⁹ Ram, “Tiny Sparrows in a Dark Forest.”

Conclusion

The article has attempted to comprehend the subjective experiences inherent within the narratives of individuals affected by the North-east insurgency and the Bangladesh War of Independence. These personal accounts serve as a vivid depiction of the human condition within a conflict-ridden environment and offer valuable insights into the lived perspectives of those directly impacted by such tumultuous circumstances. Through a sensory examination of the individual's surroundings, including their perceptions of the world around them, the study highlights the resilience and heroic efforts of these individuals in the face of adversity. The findings of the study serve as a poignant reminder to the broader community that conflict resolution can be achieved through nonviolent means and the implementation of effective preventive measures. As such, it is imperative that policymakers and political organizations reassess their approaches to conflict resolution and take into account the diverse needs, desires, cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations, and political aspirations of affected populations.