

# Echos of North East Indigenous memory study by Sruti Mala Duara

Kavita Rabnal

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bangalore University

**Abstract:** The present study is based on the analysis of the Northeast Indigenous women writer Sruti Mala Duara's work *Ashes in the Seas*. The aim of this study is to explore how memory transports us back to reminiscences of both the past and present life of the writer. The concept of Indigeneity is explored in terms of the marginalized needs of Indigenous people and as a position that challenges all forms of colonialism in its diverse ramifications. The term "Indigenous" was first used by Europeans to differentiate the Indigenous people of the Americas from enslaved Africans. It has gained popularity as an umbrella term since the 1970s. The word "Indigenous" comes from the Latin *indigena*, meaning "native" or "a group of people native to a specific region." Indigenous literature refers to literature written by Indigenous authors and it is not considered stylistically homogenous. Memory plays a vital role in the oral narratives of ancestral knowledge and intergenerational wisdom. It is a powerful and multifaceted aspect that shapes our identity, decisions and connection to the past. Memory is a fascinating and complex phenomenon that allows us to store and retrieve information. Human memories are not just simple recordings; they are constructed and influenced by our own experiences, whether positive or negative. Memory also bears witness to trauma—not just as a one-time event but as something that has long-lasting effects on both the individual and society. Some traumatic events linger in the mind, representing harsh realities, threats and suffering, all expressed through memories. This act of remembering indicates that the mind is beginning to cope with changes and reflects a personal, positive outlook on life. A concise summary of the selected novel *Ashes in the Seas* is as follows: the central character is Smriti Barua, who embarks on a journey from Assam to South India. During the journey, her mind revisits memories from her past—growing up in the peaceful small town of Guwahati as the only child of doting parents, marrying a quiet and reserved man, trying to understand love and navigating her desires and secrets as a woman. In her middle adulthood, she recalls all the stages of her past. The places she revisits take her back to moments in time.

**Key words** - cultural tapestry, immersing ashes, Indigenous, memory, reminiscence, tribal

## INTRODUCTION

Northeast India is a conglomeration of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is bestowed with abundant blessings in the form of magnificent natural surroundings, including thick forests, mighty rivers, gigantic blue hills, lush green fields and a vast reservoir of natural resources that resemble heaven on earth. Assam is the most dominant state among the eight Northeastern states. The Northeast Indigenous community represents a captivating tapestry of rich culture, vibrant traditions, diverse dialects, traditional attire, customs, music, paintings and unique practices rooted deeply in Indigenous heritage. Indigenous literature begins with oral traditions, where tribal stories, myths, songs and the wise speeches of ancestors are passed down to younger generations. This knowledge is shared among community members to preserve cultural values. The ceremonies, rituals and practices performed are derived from stories that are passed down through generations, making them a relentless pursuit to assert their identity and culture through memory. The Northeast Indigenous women writers illuminate profound literary expressions in poems, novels and short stories, contributing to feminist discourse. Celebrated Northeast women authors like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Srutimala Duara, Mitra Phukan, Jahnavi Barua, Anjum Hasan and many others have made significant contributions to society. Despite the challenges and influences of modernity, the people of Northeast India continue to preserve and celebrate their heritage, making it an intriguing part of India's cultural tapestry. The Northeast Indigenous women writers serve as powerful figures, embodying multiple facets of resilience, identity and empowerment through their literary expressions. Their narratives weave together threads of tradition and modernity, articulating pressing issues such as gender equality, struggles for social justice, Indigenous rights and male-dominated societies. By reclaiming their narratives, these writers not only empower themselves but also inspire others to be independent and bring about social change.

Sruti Mala Duara (1964), born into a family of academic writers and storytellers, began writing at a young age. Hailing from Assam in the Northeast region of India, she was an accomplished writer who received several literary awards, including the Naari Shakti Award (2015), Woman of the Year (2016), Women Achiever's Award in Literature (2019) and the Indian Women Achievers Award in Literature (2021). She was also a founding member of the Northeast Writers' Forum and made significant contributions to both English and Assamese literature, including children's stories, novels, poetry and short stories.

In the novel *Ashes in the Seas*, Smriti Barua is the protagonist, a widow in her seventies who is traveling for the fourth time from Assam to Kanyakumari, with a heart full of pain, accompanied by her daughter Veda, son-in-law Rohit and granddaughter Meghana. The purpose of the journey is to immerse the ashes of her beloved parents and late husband, Luit. Throughout her journey, she reminisces about various stages of her past life—as a daughter, wife, mother and now grandmother. As a child, she visited the same place with her parents; in early adulthood, she went as a wife with her husband; and later, in middle adulthood, she visited again as a mother with her two children, Veda and Imon and her husband, Luit. Now, in her older years, she reflects on the mixed emotions of grief for her lost loved ones while also feeling nostalgic for the blissful memories of the past when she had everyone around. These memories trouble her with a complex blend of emotions as she faces the remaining years of her life. The writer weaves the story through thirteen chapters, opening with "Yesterday Once More" and concluding with the final chapter, "Ashes in the Seas." Other chapters include: "Bokul Flowers on the Green," "Blocked In," "Footprints on the Sands," "The Land of Silk," "Down the Tracks," "Caught in Nets," "Inching Down the Narrows," "The Luit Flowers," "Unwritten Memories," "Paradise Lost," and "Through the Lens." Each chapter is permeated with the memories of the protagonist.

The author has intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative, providing a rich tapestry of two parallel stories: the protagonist's past and present emotional journey. These are not merely memories but emotions filled with deep personal experiences from the protagonist's life. The protagonist, named "Smriti," which literally means "memory," reflects

the central theme of the narrative. The present study outlines various memories from the protagonist's past life, organized into six distinct themes: childhood memories, family memories, cultural and ritual memories, personal memories and environmental memories.

Firstly, the protagonist recalls her childhood memories, where she and her friend Maya, along with her three brothers, would play "House House." She and Maya would squat on the grass and gather Bokul flowers into their folded skirts, sometimes carrying the flowers in wooden canes and hanging them on the dressing table. Many relatives would visit her house, particularly because her grandmother cooked abundant and delicious food, especially sweet pickles. The visitors were never sent away hungry. During Durga Puja, her house was filled with relatives and the festival was celebrated grandly with all the customs and rituals. Her grandmother also told captivating bedtime stories, including tales from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Sadly, her grandmother passed away soon after and her ashes were taken to Gaya, a place of pilgrimage, instead of the Brahmaputra River.

Next, the protagonist reminisces about her first love, Rajib, which began in her childhood in Guwahati, Assam. This relationship is depicted with deep emotion, capturing the innocence and intensity of young love, which, at that stage, was not yet serious. The memories of her school days are portrayed as a nostalgic and cherished part of her life. The narrator often reflects on the innocence, creativity and simplicity of childhood, which was marked by strong friendships and the joy of simple pleasures, leaving her with a smile on her face.

The protagonist reminisces about carrying the ashes of her father, mother and husband to the sea. This pilgrimage journey is a way for her to honor their memories and fulfill a deep personal desire. It represents a blend of happy and sad emotions, helping readers understand the intertwined nature of life and death. The journey reveals how deeply the protagonist is attached to her family and how she has maintained strong relationships with them. She remembers her father, the first hero of her life, who used to pamper and love her unconditionally. Father and daughter built a strong relationship, sharing their thoughts and wisdom. He taught her valuable knowledge, offered support and they spent a lot of

time together, enjoying each other's company. These memories are tinged with a sense of loss, but also with immense gratitude for the time they had together. His gentle presence continues to influence her decisions and her outlook on life.

The protagonist also reflects on her mother's strength and resilience, qualities that she admired and aspired to embody. She followed her mother's advice through the darker times of her life and learned how to balance challenges. Her mother was supportive, encouraging and determined. The protagonist recalls the stories her mother would tell her and the warmth of her embrace. These memories continue to offer comfort and guidance as she navigates her own grief. The unconditional love of her parents is irreplaceable.

Finally, the memories of her husband are a mixture of love and challenges. Their relationship was filled with companionship, but also with struggles and unmet desires. She recalls the early days of their marriage—the dreams they shared, the life they built together, the laughter, the arguments and the moments of reconciliation. These memories stand as a testament to the depth of their bond and the enduring love that remains. Her friend Sushila once said, "Boys are more attached to their mothers," but the protagonist counters, "How long are they attached until their wives come?" However, Luit was different from other men. He rarely praised his wife's efforts, preferring instead to appreciate his mother's cooking. Now, the protagonist resents the distance that Imon's wife has created between her son and herself. She feels that Imon belongs to his wife now and that they should not have left her alone when they moved abroad.

Cultural and ritual memories also manifest in the interactions between the protagonist and her daughter, as she passes down the rituals she has learned from her mother. These cultural practices and rituals have been passed down through three generations in the story. Immersing the ashes of her parents and husband is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and rituals. In Indian culture, the act of immersing ashes in the sea is considered a sacred and holy ritual, followed by many in their communities. In the novel, the sea symbolizes the final journey of the soul. The protagonist recalls the festivals, practices and ceremonies that were integral parts of her upbringing, taught to her by her parents. They

followed their own customs and traditions, which were deeply rooted in their beliefs. If they failed to practice these rituals, they would be pointed out by society. These customs and practices are not just acts but a sense of duty and responsibility. Even in modern times, these rituals and cultural practices remain unchanged.

Later, the novel continues with the protagonist's journey alongside her daughter and granddaughter. Through this, she shares her moments, not just to preserve traditions but also to create a sense of continuity and belonging. The granddaughter's curiosity and questions about the rituals provide an opportunity for the protagonist to reflect on the significance of these practices and their relevance in contemporary times. The story also analyzes the ideas of modern versus traditional practices. The protagonist's adherence to cultural rituals is sometimes met with skepticism or indifference by the younger generation. However, the memories shared throughout her journey help bridge this gap, highlighting the timeless relevance of cultural memory. The rituals and traditions are portrayed not as rigid practices but as evolving elements that adapt to changing times while retaining their core significance. Through reflection and action, the novel underscores the importance of preserving and protecting cultural memory, even as we navigate the complexities of modern life.

The protagonist skilfully illustrates the intricate tapestry of personal reflection on human emotions, including grief, loss and happiness. The author explores the detailed journey of sorrow and the healing power of memory. The novel delves into the complexities of the protagonist's mourning, capturing the raw emotions that accompany the loss of a loved one. The writer portrays the protagonist as experiencing multiple stages in her life—as a daughter, wife, mother and now, a grandmother. She was a doting child to her parents and later took on the full responsibility of her family. As a mother, she was deeply involved in raising her two children. Now, in her seventies, she recalls all her memories. One of the most striking aspects of the novel is its exploration of how memories can be both anchors and weights, grounding us in the past while simultaneously pulling us down. The protagonist's struggle to reconcile her memories with her present reality resonates with the experience of nostalgia. There are moments when memories bring warmth, reminding us of joy and

laughter, but there are also instances when they evoke deep sorrow. This duality is a common thread in the human experience and the author captures it sensitively. Thus, the protagonist's personal memories are filled with both joy and sorrow, each carrying its own emotions, much like life and death. She also expresses her personal achievements by making peace with the loss and grief of her loved ones, embracing her emotions and empathy, struggling and standing strong through all stages of her life, ultimately discovering her independence.

The environment plays a crucial role in shaping the knowledge of the readers and helping them understand the locale. In this case, the environment is filled with the natural beauty of Assam, a land of contrasts where ancient traditions coexist with modern aspirations. Its rich cultural heritage and economic potential make it a unique and vital part of the country. It is surrounded by thick forests, fresh cool breezes, several rivers and seas, with the largest being the Brahmaputra River. The river's presence is constant in the protagonist's life, representing the flow of time and the inevitability of change. The memories associated with the sea are deeply personal and reflective, capturing moments of tranquility and turbulence. The protagonist often reminisces about her childhood spent by the sea, where she would play with her parents during their visits. These memories are filled with a sense of wonder and innocence. As she grows older, the sea becomes a place of solace and reflection. The sea serves as a repository of memory, a place where the past and present intermingle. Memory is not just a passive recollection of past events but an active, living entity that shapes the author's present and future. The sea, with its vastness and depth, symbolizes the complexity of human memory, just as the sea holds countless secrets beneath its surface. Throughout the novel, the protagonist grapples with memories of her childhood, a few secrets and her first love. These memories are often triggered by sensory experiences—the smell of the sea breeze filling her life with her husband and children, the sound of waves crashing against the shore symbolizing the challenges in her life and the feel of sand beneath her feet representing how she has crossed all sorrows and now stands alone. Thus, the author illustrates the sea as one of the environmental memories.

The author describes Assam and the protagonist's detailed journey, highlighting aspects such as

lifestyle, buildings, Bakul flowers, tribal women, marine beaches, silk sarees and many other minute details. The natural landscape of Assam, with its lush greenery, blue hills and diverse flora and fauna, is a constant source of inspiration. Its rich natural beauty attracts visitors to the region. The memories of walking through the forest and connecting with the land have a deep association with nature and a strong sense of belonging. The protagonist's reflections on the environment often lead to moments of introspection and self-discovery. The beauty of the natural world serves as a mirror for her inner thoughts and emotions, helping her to understand herself better. These memories are cherished and provide a sense of continuity and grounding throughout the novel.

The writer incorporates several Assamese words that attract readers, such as Aita, Koka, Bihu, Dhan, Moi, Bokul flower and many more, which enrich the novel with their classical language. Among the eight states, Assam stands out in many ways, including its plains, geographical features, lower pollution levels and rich, diverse cities. As a result, it has gained significant importance among the states in the Northeast region. Recently, the Prime Minister announced, "Assamese will now be granted the status of a classical language, after it was approved by the Union Cabinet. Assamese culture has thrived for centuries and it has given us a rich literary tradition. May this language continue to grow in popularity in the times to come."

In *Ashes in the Seas*, the author skilfully weaves various forms of memory into a rich tapestry that deeply engages the reader. Childhood memories reflect the innocence of the protagonist's early life, while family memories offer a window into her inner world, revealing her struggles and growth. Personal memories convey the protagonist's true emotions and provide a vivid recollection of her past. Cultural and ritual memories root the characters in their Assamese heritage, celebrating traditions and customs that provide a sense of identity and belonging. Environmental memories describe the Northeast region, especially Assam and the seas, highlighting a deep connection with nature and the surrounding environment. These memories unfold at each stage of the protagonist's life—as a child, wife, mother and grandmother—narrating a journey that is both personally and universally resonant, capturing the essence of the human experience and the ongoing process of self-discovery.

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