

# Memory, Migration, And Marginalization: Reconstructing Chinese Indian Lives in Rita Chowdhury's *Makam*

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**Abstract**—India has been home to a diverse group of communities and ethnicities and remains so even today. In the British period, Chinese labourers were brought to India to work in tea gardens, forming one of the country's most significant ethnic communities. Over time, they integrated into Indian society through naturalization and intermarriage. Rita Chowdhury's narrative offers a fictionalized account of the hardships faced by the Chinese Indian community. This group established notable Chinatowns, such as Bow Bazar in Kolkata and Makum in Assam. However, it was the 1962 conflict between China and India that led to their marginalization. This paper attempts to examine the various understandings of identity and memory in the face of adversity. Rita Chowdhury's *Makam* provides a feminine perspective to an incident which is largely viewed from a political standpoint and shows how great emphasis has been given on the individual, women, family and children highlighting the emotional loss along with its social consequences. In her work, *Makam* (The Assamese Original of the English translated *Chinatown Days*), she delves into the lives of people affected by the Indo-China War of 1962 while prominently placing her female characters at the forefront. This paper aims to scrutinize identity, especially that of the Chinese-Indian community in North East India and the greater part of India.

**Index Terms**—Indo-China War of 1962, Community, Identity, Displacement, Home

## I. INTRODUCTION

The global community recognizes the disparities, injustices, biases, and misdirected anger and actions against minorities or less influential communities. Examining the plight of Chinese Indians reveals how such biases and misguided governmental actions can have catastrophic effects on communities and individuals within a nation. The detention and

deportation of the Chinese-Indian community are reminiscent of past global incidents and continue to resurface periodically. The Chinese tea garden workers brought by the British evolved into one of the ethnic groups known as Chinese Indians, and over time, these families, with Chinese fathers and Indian mothers, became an integral part of India's social fabric. By 1962, the situation had drastically shifted, and this community was perceived as outsiders. Due to public anxiety following the unexpected Chinese aggression and attempts at accession, along with impulsive political ideologies and agendas, the status of Chinese Indians shifted from neighbours and citizens to spies and adversaries. After the 1962 Indo-China conflict, the Chinese Indian community, a diasporic group within India, became the target for the Indian government and native Indians to vent their anger and frustration over China's actions. The events following the war, such as the arrests of Chinese-Indians and their internment, are seldom discussed in Indian political and social history. Studying these events raises numerous questions and curiosities about ethnic identity, national identity, a sense of belonging, and, most importantly, the sense of security associated with each. As citizens of our own country, we inherently feel secure against external threats to ourselves or our loved ones. However, the situation of the Chinese Indians presents a starkly different scenario where one's own country and people become a threat and do not hesitate to take extensive and extreme measures against them. Chinese Indians, and over the years, these blended families with a Chinese father and an Indian mother became a significant part of the Indian social fabric. By 1962, the scenario had completely changed, and this community was viewed as outsiders. Owing to general public anxiety following the unexpected Chinese aggression and

attempt at accession, as well as rash political ideologies and agendas, the status of the Chinese Indians turned from neighbours and citizens to spies and foes. After the 1962 Indo-China attack, the Chinese Indian community, which was a diasporic community within India, became the target group for the Indian government and the original Indians to express their anger and frustration. While studying the post 1962 Indo-China war scenario in India, we have to develop an understanding of the history of the Chinese-Indian community and their position and role in society prior to the war, in order to truly explore the sense of betrayal and shock as experienced by the Chinese-Indian community.

Ethnic conflicts and disagreements occur in nations where innumerable cultures and ethnicities coexist. However, the State, government, and law enforcement must act as agents of balance, as someone who keeps a check to ensure no injustices, no escalations of trifle issues, or no harm is brought upon any of such communities as a result of differences. As a country that is susceptible to such misjudgements and actions, it is only a small but significant step to acknowledge the blunder of an action taken by the country's leaders and the population that blindly blamed and attacked a community that resided along with them for centuries. An understanding of the social and cultural build of Indian society at the time against the political backdrop will present us with an image of the nature of identity and community within society and an understanding of how displacement due to any crisis can leave scars on the development of a sense of belonging or identity of a community. For the immigrant community, identity becomes a complex entity because of the change in their social, cultural, and political environment apart from others. For the first Chinese immigrants, their sense of identity must have remained exclusively and undoubtedly Chinese, but their subsequent generations might have struggled to create their identities because of the complexity attached to belonging to one nation and culture by birth and by residing in the midst of it all and the other sense of social and cultural identity inherited from their parents belonging to the other foreign society. Identity is an individual's personal marker to present him/her before others and to present him/her as a part of a group or society. (Hazarika, Introduction viii). The transformation in the collective identity of a group within the same community and society exemplifies

the highly fluid and unstable nature of identity. It often shifts with even minor changes in external perception or the environment. An individual may struggle to maintain a consistent sense of identity when faced with alterations in their surroundings and the attitudes of those around them. As Foucault suggests, identity is a subject position that a person assumes at a specific moment. In this context, identity is a construct that evolves with changes in an individual's subject position, implying that a person holds multiple identities. Theorists have explored the concept of identity from various angles. For instance, Jenkins argues that identity pertains to the ways individuals and groups are distinguished in their social interactions with others. (Hazarika, Introduction viii). This research paper also examines the role of memory and narrative with reference to diasporic communities, as well as the importance of having a feminine narrative, especially on issues that are largely viewed through more political and social perspectives rather than the emotional and personal aspects. Immigrant communities forming diasporic existence in other countries put forth an interesting blend of identities and their understanding of self-identity. Along with identity, memory and narrative are also important. While narratives do have some form of memory involved, in this case it becomes vital because it is through the memory of the ones who suffered and survived that an alternate narrative is being developed for a more rounded understanding of an issue that is otherwise understood from the political and broader perspective rather than a more personal and focused one.

Rita Chowdhury (1960-Present) a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for Assamese literature, has written many works of great impact and significance including notable books like *Makam*, *Deo Langkhui*, *Jala Padma* and about 50 poems including "Boga Matir Tulaxi", "Banariya Batahar Xuhuri" etc. She has also been the recipient of other notable awards like Assam Sahitya Sabha Award for "Abirata Yatra", Kalaguru Bishnu Prasad Rabha Award by Assam Sahitya Sabha for her novel *Deo Langkhui*, G.A. Kulkarni Award for the translation of her work *Makam* into Marathi amongst others. Dr Chowdhury writes extensively on the realities of society in relation to its cultural and social happenings, as well as on issues and events of history. Most of her work stems from

research into the social phenomena that her work revolves around. It also reflects a strong under flowing current of feminism and a strong feminine presence. *Makam* is a sharp and historically grounded examination of a long-forgotten group whose identities memories and life experiences were hidden by political mistrust, national fears and border-making violence. The article's main focus is on how *Makam*, which documents the suppressed histories of Chinese Indians in Assam, especially during and after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, turns into an act of literary retrieval. This article highlights how Chowdhury's book serves as a historical archive, a counter-narrative, and an ethical testimony, illuminating the suffering of a legally Indian but racially perceived 'Other' community. By challenging the nation's selective memory and casting doubt on the legitimacy of the state's actions during wartime paranoia and humanizing the community that endured forced displacement, detention, loss of livelihood, and rupture from homeland and identity, the author of the article contends that Chowdhury's work re-inscribes Chinese Indians into the national consciousness. The main criticism focuses on how the nation-state creates internal enemies during times of crisis and how racial profiling, linguistic prejudice, and political instability turn regular people into suspects. This article focuses on how *Makam* reconstructs the internment of Assamese residents of Chinese descent in Deoli Camp, Rajasthan, using personal narratives, close family histories, and collective suffering. This event is rarely acknowledged in the mainstream Indian historiography. The novel is portrayed as a place where memories resurface in opposition to erasure, where testimonies mount in opposition to forgetting, and where the resilience and dignity of a marginalized group take centre stage in the story. By doing this, Chowdhury's work reveals the profound frailty of citizenship itself and recovers a marginalized past, demonstrating how legal belonging collapses when ethnicity takes precedence over national identity. The novel uses personal narratives, oral histories, archival fragments, and fictionalized reconstructions to highlight the severity of the situation facing the Chinese Indian community. It illustrates how individuals who had lived in India for many generations managing sawmills, running carpentry units, taking part in regional celebrations, speaking Assamese, and marrying into Assamese families were

abruptly labelled as Chinese nationals and imprisoned without charge or trial. Chowdhury's depictions of camps, surveillance, and forced labour are reminiscent of the greater worldwide history of incarceration during times of war, ranging from the mass detention of ethnic groups in colonial and postcolonial settings to the Japanese internment camps in the United States. However, as the article emphasizes, *Makam* is an attempt to comprehend the emotional architecture of displacement how fear, uncertainty, broken relationships, property loss, and long-term psychological scars shape the survivors and their descendants rather than just being a chronicle of suffering. Using this perspective, the book turns into a political intervention, arguing that historical justice necessitates recognition, compassion, and remembrance. It asserts the predicament of Chinese Indians and shows how minority groups frequently suffer as a result of geopolitical conflict. The article highlights how Chowdhury examines the structural violence ingrained in bureaucratic systems, such as identity cards, surveillance registers, police questioning, and camp documentation, exposing how these administrative tools turn into tools of exclusion. The article goes on to say that the novels narrative technique, which alternates between the past and the present, enables the reader to witness how trauma is passed down through generations, how silence becomes a survival strategy, and how memory becomes both a burden and a haven. The characters are frequently torn between wanting legal recognition in the nation, considering home, and feeling nostalgic for a lost homeland. Many characters struggle with a fractured sense of identity because they are neither fully accepted in India nor connected to China. This has resulted in what the article refers to as double displacement, which is both emotional uprooting and cultural homelessness.

The representation of women in *Makam* is another important issue. This article focuses on the particular difficulties women faced, such as sexual vulnerability, family separation, increased labour, and the emotional burden of supporting families during difficult times. However, women also take on the role of memory and resiliency bearers, serving as the foundation for the story's historical reconstruction. The *Makam* woman, also known as the Golden Horse Country woman, is discussed in the article as a symbol of hybridity,

perseverance, and migration. Chowdhury illustrates how cultural interchange, intermarriage, and community building transcend strict national borders through female characters. The patriarchal and nationalist system that define who belongs and who does not are criticized through these women. The novel's wider cultural significance is also highlighted. *Makam* turns into a memorial work giving a neglected period of Northeast Indian history a voice. It presents the Chinese Indian community skilled labourers, traders, artisans, and neighbours as contributors to Assam's economic and cultural fabric rather than as outsiders. By reminding readers that Assam has always been a mosaic of cultures shaped by migration, labour and intercultural exchange, Chowdhury undermines the prevailing narrative of Assamese identity according to the article. It challenges nationalist narratives that homogenize by reclaiming plural heritage. This article also emphasizes the novel's ethical components. *Makam* challenges readers to confront historical injustice and acknowledge the importance of collective remembrance through poignant storytelling character-driven flashbacks and in-depth accounts of camp life. According to the article, healing social divisions, accepting state responsibility, and fostering a more inclusive national memory all depend on these kinds of retellings. According to this, the book promotes restorative justice through public awareness, empathy, and acknowledgment rather than necessarily in legal terms. It contends that by doing this, *Makam* joins a broader literary movement in South Asia that aims to reclaim suppressed micro-histories and challenge official narratives that put political expediency ahead of human truth. This article concludes by arguing that the novel provides a compelling commentary on how literature can recover suppressed histories. Chowdhury ensures that the trauma of the Chinese Indian community is neither forgotten nor minimized by including them in the conversation about national memory. According to the article's conclusion, *Makam* is not just a regional novel but also an important postcolonial work that honours a community's bravery in surviving, rebuilding, and insisting on its proper place in Indian history, challenges the politics of belonging, and highlights the frailty of citizenship in times of crisis. In her work, *Makam* (the Assamese original of the English translated *Chinatown Days*) presents history or social

situations through the eyes and mind of the woman involved. A thorough study of her writings takes her readers to the realm of societal phenomena led by the feminine experience. *Chinatown Days* by Rita Chowdhury is a fictional retelling of the plight of the Chinese Indian community in Assam after the 1962 Indo-China War. This novel follows the lives of a few Chinese immigrant labourers who were brought to Assam by British colonialists to establish tea garden industries within India.

As the story progresses, we see the development of a Chinese Indian community as these Chinese labourers started marrying into the Indian society, giving birth to a new group of Chinese-Indian individuals, Indian citizens but with Chinese ancestry. Chowdhury puts great effort into detailing the establishment and flourishing of the society and the families of this mixed ethnic group to a point where they become an integral and important part of the Indian society. The sudden disruption of their lives is brought about by the Indian political decision to arrest and deport all individuals having a Chinese name, ancestry, or any link whatsoever to China. The process of arresting and deporting its own citizens on the suspicion of being Chinese spies rips apart families. By learning about the characters and their family and socio-cultural backgrounds, readers can develop a deep connection with them. For instance, as we come to know about little Yiu Yi or the newly blossoming relationship of Pulok and Mei Lin which later takes the centre stage as they get married with hopes of a happy life but Mei Lin gets deported to China as part of the then ongoing process of arresting and deporting anyone who had a Chinese name or any form of connection to the Chinese, one cannot help but feel for the thousands of Chinese-Indian families that are torn apart in the post war atrocious actions of the Indian government in the name of retaliating against the Chinese aggressors. Chowdhury, true to her style, ensures that the story focuses on the female experience. In her development of the story, the women, their families, lives, and experiences are projected with prominence, ensuring the reflection of the feminine experience in an otherwise traditionally masculine setting of the post-war anxious political environment. Her female characters like Mei Lin, Yiu Yi, Suhagmoni, Phulmati and Xonpahi amongst others became a part of the Chinese-Indian communities through marital ties reflect the thousands of women who suffered the harsh

results of the government's attempt to rid the country of its Chinese 'spy' citizens. In her narration, Chowdhury explores the often-overlooked female perspective of a historical event, particularly through a feminine lens. The narrative follows Arunav Bora, a young writer who travels to Toronto for a writers' conference. There, he meets Lei Lin, a woman whose animosity towards Indians surprises him. Curious about her feelings, he accepts an invitation to her home, where he encounters her mother. To his astonishment, both Lei Lin and her mother converse with him in Assamese, and he notices that Lei Lin doesn't appear entirely Chinese. There's an indefinable quality about her features. As said, people ignore the fact while listening that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). She explains that globally, there are individuals who seem partly Chinese but are actually Chinese Indians. She inquires if he has ever visited Makum and begins to share her story, asking if he could write about their experiences.

*"Pariba? Bharotor matit theo hoi amar kotha kobo pariba? Hahoh ase?"*

*(Assamese Language)*

"Could you? Will you able to speak about us by standing on the soil of India? Are you courageous enough to do so?" (Translated in English)

Chowdhury's work presents a multitude of characters that all help build the understanding of the Chinese Indian Community in Makum. Even though her work doesn't follow one character only she puts great emphasis and focus on her female characters. The work starts off in the present day with the narrator having a talk with Mei Lin and Pulok's daughter who now lives in China following her mother's deportation while she was still pregnant. The story begins with the introduction of the male characters that were first brought into India to establish a tea garden business for the British Empire and then gradually follows the lives of these men as they marry Indian women and develop a mixed ethnic family. With the passage of time, Chowdhury develops the story focusing on the women characters of this Chinese Indian society. Women like Suhagmoni and Phulmati are raising families with the Chinese men and on the other hand, the second-generation Chinese-Indians like Mei Lin are further blurring the distinction between Indian and Chinese as they marry Indians like Pulok Barua giving birth to more ethnically unique families. This combination of both communities is crucial to remember because as

the subsequent arrests and deportation happen, the criteria for the same seem to be extremely problematic as the ones accused and arrested are not Chinese people living in the country, but rather are Indians with a Chinese ancestry passed on from one grandparent, lending them perhaps a surname, a name or just a cultural history to call Chinese. This becomes even more problematic as Chinese-Indian husbands are removed from their Indian wives or Chinese Indian children are arrested leaving behind parents or a parent with an Indian name and ancestry. Similarly, a Chinese Indian woman is removed from her new born baby because the child bears the Indian surname of his or her Indian origin father. In this way, Chowdhury succeeds in placing the readers into the lives of these mixed ethnic families which helps the readers realize the complexity and the error in distinguishing and labelling people as purely Chinese or Indian Individuals, a complexity that was totally ignored by the government while carrying out the haphazard arrests and deportation of these people.

This paper aims at understanding the importance of everyday life as a signifier of the social and political environment of a community or a nation as a whole. The everyday life of the Chinese Indian community is taken into account to understand the construction and sudden disruption of the same as a signifier of integration into a community and the subsequent disintegration of this sense of security and everyday life. Even though the Chinese have resided within the country for centuries it is important to study the post 1962 war scenario because it unravels a lot about the fragility and inconsistency of the idea of an identity. As members of a community and a nation we possess a sense of social identity and belonging. According to the social identity theory by Henry Tajfel, social identity is a person's sense of which they are, the group they belong to such as family, social class which are a source of pride and self-esteem. Even though the world is pushing towards a sense of global identity, every individual possesses and develops upon a certain primary sense of identity stemming from their cultural and historical identity. The Chinese diaspora is one of the most prominent and widely spread-out community. While much has been studied and discussed regarding the diaspora belonging to other parts of the world, as Indians we rarely discuss or have a knowledge about their presence in the country, their history within our country and most importantly why this community had

diminished and how they had to face the brunt of an entire nation because of their historical and social ancestry. Amitav Ghosh comments *Chinatown Days* deserves to find a wide audience, not only because of its many merits as a novel, but also because it tells the story that ought to be better known". The Hindu writes "Rita Chowdhury reminds us that those who populate her novel are our people too. It's a powerful suggestion". Lastly, it is because of Dr Rita Chowdhury's extensive efforts in portraying the truly heartbreaking incidents that followed the 1962 Chinese attacks on India that has got her work recognition beyond the Assamese readership.

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