

Reading Rushdie's 'Homeland' Locally

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Introduction

Benedict Anderson's seminal book *Imagined Community* draws attention to the imagined reconstruction of the past on the basis of newly acquired national consciousness in the present. Anderson points that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being." (Anderson, 19) This point holds tremendous significance when discussions of the problems of 'homeland' within various parts of India, are conducted. While discussing the problems of nationalism in India, we must try to understand the fact that different communities of religion, race, and tribe have contributed to the 'imagined' phenomenon of the Indian nation. Thus, in India, where countless identities mix, contradict and interact with each other, there can be found a futile attempt at reconstructing the past to justify one's attachment to a particular political space, which I would like to call 'homeland'. The discussions of nation and nationalism would definitely help us assume that the material and social conditions can considerably alter theoretical positions and propositions, and that the ground reality may drastically change the established notions. This becomes quite apparent when we study the latest discourses nationalism in post-independence India in which social ills like terrorism and illegal-immigration are taken as the products of the third world politics, which such discourses are unable to prohibit.

A contemporary Indian English writer like Salman Rushdie has beautifully addressed the failure of nationalism in India mainly in his fictional works like *Midnight's Children* (1981). In this novel, the experience of marginality within India is quite explicit, and Rushdie finds it quite difficult to conform to the contemporary definition of what this marginality tends to be. By hinting at the paradoxical discourse on marginality in post-colonialism, Rushdie, in this novel, provides an alternative reading of post colonialism itself. Such a discourse also constitutes one of his major intellectual renderings of the Indian English writers to narrativise their experiences of India as a nation in the post-independence period. For, according to Rushdie, when certain cultural identities are taken to be representative of some essential Indianness of some groups, and when such identities are made to represent the whole of the nation, those outside such a scope risk marginalization and victimization. A study of the novels of Rushdie is very useful in this context. Also important is an examination of the ways in which the 'constructed' nature of reality, of ideas, of histories, of tradition, get re-examined through their discussions in terms of the local contexts which further problematizes the representation of nation and nationalism that his fictions often tend to demonstrate. It is against these contexts that the reading of Salman Rushdie's novels from the North Eastern part of India holds the centre stage of my discussion in this paper. However, the point I am trying to raise is that there is an adequate lack serious discussion on the North East in his novels, although here and there, while discussing the inherent political turmoil in India, he does makes some

references to the North Eastern states. This paper is thus an attempt to critique Rushdie's lack of awareness as far as the problems of 'homeland' in the North East of India is concerned.

Imaginary Homelands and Salman Rushdie

Salman Rushdie's non-fictional work *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), that ascribed the 'imaginary' nature of 'homelands', began to occupy much critical space in literary and scholarly discussions in Contemporary Indian Writing in English in the last decade of the 20th century. Subsequently, his idea of "Imaginary Homelands" enabled his readers to read his fictional and non-fiction works in the line of the critical works by the famous theorists of Nation and Nationalism like Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. However, in the introduction to the book *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie also states that the essay "Imaginary Homelands" is the brainchild of his experiences of contemporary world politics in 1982 during which the structures of the world underwent noticeable changes. According to him, this period was a crucial one in the sense that new "possibilities, uncertainties, intransigences and dangers" were making their presence felt like never before. Then, he also reflects that a decade later "religious militancy threatens the foundations of the secular state." (Rushdie, *Imaginary*, 2) While stating this, Rushdie was referring to the Hindu nationalist definitions of the state at the cost of the secular ideal in India as it further encouraged and intensified the growing extremism of the minority groups within India. This rise has been wonderfully described by the metaphors of "fragmentation" and "many-headed monsters" in his *Midnight's Children*. When we read Rushdie's essay "Imaginary Homelands", we find him referring to India as his 'lost' country or 'homeland' as he states: "..., and the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time." (9) Thus, his idea of a 'homeland' mostly symbolizes a 'longing' from his exiled state, as the Iranian fatwa phase had added a new dimension to his exilic condition.

Contemporary globalization and the phenomenon of migration have dismantled the idea of homogenous, local places in any country of the world. Rushdie's own experience as a migrant helps him delve deeper into the various aspects of the idea of 'homeland' in the book *Imaginary Homelands*. One such experience is deliberated by Rushdie like the following:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in sort, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

(Rushdie, *Imaginary*, 10)

So, from Rushdie's view point, the idea of 'homelands' being 're-claimed' is to be considered significant because for a migrant writer like him, who has spent most of his life outside India, the idea of a 'homeland' naturally haunts him. But, what about an

insider's view of 'homeland' within the Indian nation? Since the North-East is politically a part of the Indian Nation, our perception of the problematics behind the idea of 'homelands' in this area has to be re-contextualized. But the irony is that the same experiences of 'homelands' compel us to 're-imagine' the nation at the cost of thousands of lost lives. In such a situation, one needs to seriously consider the issue of imagining and re-imagining a nation. One such consideration comes from Neera Chandhoke in her essay entitled "A Nation Searching for a Narrative in Times of Globalisation." She refutes Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" and urges for "re-imagining" the nation. According to her, 're-imagining' of the Indian nation can take place under four or more possible conditions. The first condition will arise when memories of the moment of 'imagining' a nation during the freedom struggle begin to fade from people's memory. Ironically, the second condition emanates out of the fact that imagining a nation as a plural society, inevitably generates 'multiple imaginations' of multiple nations an example of which led to the partition of India. If we take the case of Kashmir and the North East, this condition seems to be still functional because these 'nations of intent' seek to define their political identity against the original narrative of one, united, political community. The third condition usually arises when religious, regional, language, and ethnic communities within the 'plural' nation increasingly start demanding autonomy, often against the narrative of homogeneous nationalism. Such a condition will conversely consolidate itself with forces to build a homogeneous, 'united' nation through suppressing their identities. The fourth condition, implicit mostly in the post-colonial world, tends to re-narratives the national stories, often in a belligerent mood, when the international community intervenes openly in the affairs of sovereign nations. In such conditions, the sovereignty of the recipient countries has been deeply compromised. Consequently, most nations have sought, often in disastrous ways, to counter these interventions by aggressively restating their own status as nation, reformulating the process of the original act of imagining the nation. In the micro level, the national consensus had further frayed as regional movements in parts of the North East challenged the territorial integrity of the country. Chandhoke thus provides very useful insights into the discussions of the problems of identity, 'homeland', and nationalism within India which in turn add to our experiences of the North East of very recent times.

In an interview with *India Today* entitled "A Fantasy Called India" (August 18, 1997) Rushdie claims that there had never been a political entity called India until 1947. Except being a zone called India, what became independent had never previously existed. So, the formation of a nation-state was only an 'invention' or 'construction' of the nationalist movement. Moreover, the nation-states are part of collective fantasies and thus the history of India is one of independent nation-states. These independent histories subsequently collectivised themselves into the idea of the contemporary India. This hints at the issues of economic and cultural disparity within India and Rushdie seeks to locate such disparity in his narrative construction of India or "Imaginary Homeland". The interesting point is that throughout his fictional and non-fictional works, Rushdie has tasted alternatives to the conventional categories of identity by critiquing traditional and rooted ideas of nationalism and privileging instead the feelings of a migrant figure freed from the confines of a national commitment. As he writes: "To be a migrant is perhaps to be the only species of human being free from the scheme of nationalism." (Rushdie, *Imaginary*, 124) According to Rushdie this 'free' figure has a strength. He suspects

reality having experienced several ways of being. (125) The Canadian writer Randy Boyagoda in his book *Race Immigration and American Identity in the Fictions of Salman Rushdie* discusses some of these issues in more detail. According to him, Rushdie's American experience transgresses national borders and concepts of identity. Rushdie offers a critical reading of transnational inequalities of contemporary economic and cultural productions. He imagines America as embodying a set of practices. This is an extraterritorial gesture that dismisses organic connections between identity, place and history as available in the Indian context.

Such discussions have actually provoked disputes inside Rushdie criticism. For example, in 2003, Andrew Teverson indicates 'two distinct camps' regarding Rushdie's role as a writer. He states: "In one camp are these writers and critics who believe that Rushdie's tendency to incorporate and rework previous systems of thinking and writing is enabling because it allows him to take down the master's house using the master's own tools. In the other camp are those who argue that Rushdie is establishing his oppositional politics in relation to colonial modes of writing, identifies post colonialism as a political form that can only ever reply to, and revalidate a colonialist center." (Teverson, 332) Timothy Brennan however, offers a measured response. He is critical about the class and race insensitivities implicit in Rushdie's cosmopolitan self while remaining alert to his question of literary form, nation and individual identity. Such observations help us assume that Rushdie has not been so sensitive to the actual problematic issues within India simply because he does not stay here. At the same time, he does not seem to have done any serious research on problems related to 'homeland' within this part of India, although he makes many passing reference to the North East Indian states.

"Homeland" issues in the North East and Salman Rushdie's Novels

In Cultural Geography a 'homeland' denotes the place with which an ethnic group shares a long history and a deep cultural connection with the country in which a particular national identity developed. Thus, it connotes the country of one's origin. However, the idea of 'homelands' seems to be in vogue through its discussion in diaspora politics to understand which one must first refer to the historical context of diaspora which is a transnational community mostly defined as a singular ethnic group based upon shared identity. Diasporas result from historical emigration from an original 'homeland' to another place. In modern cases, however, migration and diaspora associated with a certain territory can be historically documented. Whether this territory is in fact the 'homeland' of a specific ethnic group is a political matter. But, contrary to this view of 'homeland', there is another possible way to discuss 'homeland' — that is even ethnic identity also produces the idea of a 'homeland'.

The North East of India now comprises the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. Thus, it has been one of the immensely diverse regions of South East Asia. In terms of homeland related conflicts, there are sufficient similarities and linkages among the constituent states of this region. In a post-nationalist period, an examination of the roots of such problems and their implications in an increasingly globalized world remains significant. Because, conflicts

over the issues of territory and homeland in the North East has a history of more than one hundred years. The divisive trends visible among various groups within India can be said to have started with the creation of Nagaland in 1963. Following similar patterns of identity formation, there emerged other states like Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and a number of autonomous district councils. Gradually, movements over ethnically defined demands were sought to be placed in a sense of security related to one's land or people. It is against this background that the homeland issue still remains one of the most debated issues in this part of India.¹ The idea of the North East also got wide currency only after the reorganization of the various regions, and the formation of Bangladesh. Today we have total 8 states with Sikkim joining NE Council recently in the 90s. As B. B. Kumar states, the problem of separateness and secessionism can be traced back in colonial times. The British policies of gradual segregation of tribal and non-tribal, hills and the plains, broke down centuries of cultural and historical continuum and togetherness. Colonial misinterpretation of culture further intensified the problems. Kumar opines that this tendency runs through the present time too.

So, the North East of India and the identity crisis faced by various tribes and groups within it make room for a discussion of 'homeland' not necessarily in the diasporic sense.² If one delves deeper into this area, one will find that several studies have already been done under the rubric of 'North East Studies' on these issues, and each time views on the problems of the NE has been changing. For example, in his article entitled "North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis" written in 1987, the author B. P. Singh reflects that much attention during the 1990s, have been paid to insurgency, the 'foreign nationals' issue, tribal 'uprisings', 'brutalities' committed by the Indian security forces on the indigenous people, 'involvement' of foreign agencies in the area, political 'horse-trading' and floods. But, there has never been any serious analysis of the economic, cultural and demographic factors which have acquired different connotation in the wake of the rapid modernization taking place in the region since the 1950s. Discussing the problem of 'homeland' within the discipline of Cultural Geography, we can say that the North East region is the 'homeland' of three major groups: the hill tribes, the plains tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains. Within each group, there is tremendous variety in terms of race, language, and religion. But, over the years, as B. P. Singh writes, the North East has been boiling with contradictory processes of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity. Consequent electoral calculations have been based on the recognition of these ethnic nests. Despite the secularization of political affairs, the various religious and cultural groups continue to play another important role in social affairs. Thus, the traditional bonds of ethnic kinship and religious loyalties that provide security and identity also create a bewildering set of problems. He further writes:

What is essential is to realize that the widespread identity crisis syndrome has been caused by the large-scale migration of population from outside the region during the last one hundred years and a total dependence of the people on the land and State apparatus for their livelihood. This phenomenon has made the local population feel outnumbered and swamped by people of different cultural origins. The inability of various sections of the migrant population to adapt themselves to local language, customs and traditions has further accentuated the 'identity crisis'...It needs to be clarified that the 'identity crisis' in North East does not come from the urge to national integration as it firmly adheres to the maintenance of a plural character and the development of the tribal people in terms of their own genius.

(Singh, 278)

This analysis addresses the inherent heterogeneity within the North East and how it has finally led to a crisis of identity as well as to the difficulty of forming 'homelands' based on such collective identities. But, the shift in perspective is clearly visible in another study conducted in 2009 in an article entitled "Identity Politics and Social Exclusion in India's North-East: The Case for Re-distributive Justice" by N. K. Das. The author discusses how the various brands of identity politics, since the colonial days, have served to create the basis of exclusion of groups in the North East which have subsequently resulted in various forms of rifts, often envisaged in binary terms like: majority-minority; 'sons of the soil'-immigrants; local-outsiders; tribal-non-tribal; hills-plains; inter-tribal and intra-tribal etc. The troubles in the strategic and sensitive border areas, low level of development, immense cultural diversity, democratic processes and social exclusion within this part of India have finally resulted in more marginalization and deprivation making the cry for a separate 'homelands' the basis of various separatist movements. It can be argued that the local people's anxiety for preservation of culture and language, often driven by a sudden 'narcissist self-awareness' or dirty power-politics, and their demand of autonomy, cannot be outrightly rejected as dysfunctional. Their aspirations for a separate 'homeland' should be seen rather as prerequisites for distributive justice, which no nation state can refuse to accept.

Let me simplify this situation with a reference to Paul Brass who boldly argues: "There is nothing inevitable about the rise of ethnic identity and its transformation into nationalism among diverse people of the contemporary world. Rather the conversion of cultural differences into basis for political differentiation between peoples arise only under specific circumstances which need to be identified clearly." (Brass, 13) This further compels us to examine the meaning of Nationalism in the contemporary sense. If Nationalism is a participatory project because it is plural, each participant group naturally constructs its own and perhaps incommensurable version of what it means to be a nation. Therefore, any narrative of the Indian nation, in order to fulfill the conditions of its own existence, has to recognize as well as appreciate the fact of plurality. Salman Rushdie's celebration of plurality in the Indian nation is worth-mentioning in the sense that he could recognize the plurality of the multitude being the essence of India. But, this does not clearly explain his thesis of 'homelands' as 'imaginary' in the North East Indian context. Because, unlike Rushdie might have thought of, homeland issue in the North East is also related to ethnic issues. It is because as Brass writes: "ethnic identity is itself a variable, rather than a fixed or given disposition. This also hints at the ways in which traditions are invented and social realities are constructed." (Brass, 13) The fact is that the cultural forms, values and practices of an ethnic group become the political resources of the elites competing for political power and economic advantage. They are made symbols and referents for identifying the members of the group, which are called up in order to create a political identity more easily. (15) What Brass is trying to say is quite relevant in the North East of India.

The problem of 'homeland' in India's North East also relates to the unavailability of a common linguistic line in this region. With the formation of Nagaland in 1963, new states like Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, which were former separate British provinces in the pre independence period, started to raise demands for autonomy.

This was because these provinces were constituted not on the basis of language but on ethnic identity based on race, geographical and topographical distinctiveness. So, naturally, at a later time, the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos etc. began to raise various demands in the name of 'homeland' and border disputes. This is one of the most important reasons behind the emergence of various problems in the North East. The second problem is the unabated influx of outsiders—both Indian and Foreigner, experienced mostly in Assam, through the deportation of the foreign nationals mainly from Bangladesh and granting constitutional safe-guarding to the political identity of the indigenous people of Assam. Chandan Sarma in this context refers to Sanjib Baruah's essay entitled "Cutting States to sizes" in which Baruah quotes Granville Austin who mentioned that till 1993, there were nearly two dozen laws implemented to change boundaries or create new states in India by simple majority in the parliament. These laws have been used most frequently in the North East in the name of keeping peace in a border region. However, only the opposite has happened. (Baruah, 4) Subsequently, the manipulative role played by the Government of India has instigated smaller ethnic groups to weaken the process of forming common political, economic and cultural identities at a broader level. Thus, the issue of 'homeland' has remained a perennial source of debate till today.

One may ask how the 'homeland' problems within the North East are connected to Rushdie's fictional works. There is however a deep connection. The year 1980, when *Midnight's Children* was published, was also crucial for the experiences in a North Eastern state like Assam. Because during this time, Assam experienced the students' movement against the heavy influx from Bangladesh and the use of forces to combat such influxes. Soon there also emerged in India a 'parallel distinctiveness' of both the center and the regions which further problematized the layered character of Indianness once again proving the failure of Indian nationalism to unite the regional identities in India and making the struggle for 'homeland' a perennial source of many future problems.³ We also find that Salman Rushdie, in his 21st century novel *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), does refer to two of the North Eastern states like Assam and Nagaland to expose the futility of dividing the country in the name of regionalism, ethnicity, identity politics and religion in post independence India. Rushdie's narrator in this novel narrates this situation very aptly in this manner:

Kashmir for the Kashmiris, a moronic idea. This tiny landlocked valley with barely five million people to its name wanted to control its own fate. Where did that kind of thinking get you? If Kashmir, why not also Assam for the Assamese, Nagaland for the Nagas? And why stop there? Why shouldn't towns or villages declare independence, or city streets, or even individual houses? Why not demand freedom for one's bedroom, or call one's toilet a republic? Why not stand still and draw a circle around your feet and name that Selfistan?

(Rushdie, *Shalimar* 101)

However, references to a North Eastern place like Assam is already available in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). In order to celebrate the secular environment of the city of Bombay as compared to the other places in India, the narrator of the novel stated:

What magic stirred into that insaan soup, what harmony emerged from that cacophony. In Punjab, Assam, Kashmir, Meerut—in Delhi, in Calcutta—from time to time they slit their neighbour's throats and took warm showers, or red bubble baths, in all that spumming blood.

They dill you for being circumcised and they killed you because your foreskins flayed dark skin and if you spoke the wrong language you could loose your twisted tongue. In Bombay, such things never happened.

(Rushdie, *The Moor* 350)

Again in his short novel *Fury* (2001), which is based in a non-Indian setting, Rushdie is found providing a very passing reference to Assam in the following manner.

In the years that followed, however, Jack [a character in the novel] witnessed, over and over again, the tragic gift of his species for ignoring the notion of ethnic solidarity: the brutalities of blacks against blacks, Arabs against Arabs, Serbs against Bosnians and Croats. Ex Yugo, Iran-Iraq, Rwanda, Eritrea, Afghanistan. The exterminations in Timor, the communal massacres in Meerut and Assam, the endless color-blind cataclysm of the earth.

(Rushdie, *Fury*, 2001)

In such extracts, a reader not only comprehends Rushdie's awareness on the notions of freedom, autonomy, and nationalism, symbolized by the struggle for the so-called 'homelands', but also identifies Rushdie's awareness of certain internal problems of India like the All Assam Students' Movement against the heavy influx of foreigners into the land of Assam, which have re-gained much significance after the wake of the religious movements and militant insurgency in various parts of the North East, including Assam. This necessitates our understanding of what a 'homeland' actually is, although in his book *Imaginary Homelands* Rushdie has provided many explanations on the idea of 'homeland' as imaginary. As we have experienced in very recent times, this struggle for 'homeland' in this region cannot be rejected as a futile exercise or as 'imaginary'.⁴ Instead, in this part of India, the idea of 'homeland' is politically very active as it has caused much trouble and bloodshed in recent years. If we take a close look at the socio-political history of the North East, where the notion of identity of a particular community itself is constantly changing under pressures from various blocks, it seems that the idea of 'homeland' has, in a way, helped in re-defining the meaning of territorial borders following the discontent among the heterogeneous linguistic and socio-cultural groups both inside and outside the North Eastern region.

Conclusion:

In his essay "Imaginary Homelands", Rushdie calls for 'books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world'. Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* is an attempt to preserve his inner self and to sustain his ties with his culture of origin despite the sense of rootlessness. And this has been done through the recreation of the past, of myths, legends and personal memory of India. These are key to understanding Rushdie. His novels also advocate that the cultural exchange brought by the British Empire has enriched rather than cheapened contemporary literature. In his novels, Rushdie has demanded the right to be a part of the telling of one's own history in a fractured and confused postcolonial climate. His challenge against official historical truth, against petty nationalistic ideas and the censorship of the state hold tremendous significance. Thus, Rushdie's novels put forward suggestions that the form of "the novel actually offers a model to deal with sociopolitical splintering and division, teaches a politics and a way of living." (Dutta, 87) In *Jaguar*

Smile (1987), a travelogue to Nicaragua during its 1980s civil war, Rushdie reflects that “the revolution (Nicaraguan) had really been an act of migration [for rural farmers]...they were inventing their country and more than that, themselves in movements, resettlement, and attachment to new local space.” (Rushdie, *Jaguar* 86). Such meditations, Rushdie explains, were provoked by the idea of ‘Home’ [which has] never stopped being a problem for him. These are indicative of his obsession with questions of belonging that arise within, yet are not contained or explained by national contexts. (86) But, Rushdie tends to apply his migrant-imagination thesis to any setting or problem that involve geography, movement, and questions of national identity and plurality. This technique opens him up to the charges of over-intellectualizing and attempting to authenticate political and historical complexities of society which are of course read differently within the North East of India.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay “Whose Imagined Community” argues that during 1950s and 1960s, nationalism was still regarded as a feature of the anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa. But by 1970s it had become a matter of ethnic politics following which people in the third world killed each other—“sometimes in wars between regular armies, sometimes more depressingly in cruel and often protracted civil wars and increasingly, it seemed, by technologically sophisticated and virtually unstoppable acts of terrorism” (Chatterjee, 24). Such an experience, in the NE however, was named a struggle for homeland. But for Rushdie, the question of ‘homeland’ arise because he can leave it, or has already left it, but for us, the readers of Rushdie in the North East, we can never escape from ‘homeland’ related problems. Rushdie writes: “If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.”(Rushdie, *Imaginary*, 15) But, this does not clearly explain the fact that ‘homelands’ have ceased to raise any problem because this type of distance is to be read only in the literal sense. One might always wonder, why Rushdie has not yet penned any full length novel on the ‘homeland’ problems of the North East, although several attempts have been made to discuss the problems of Kashmir in his novel *Shalimar the Clown*. Therefore, to conclude, Rushdie’s ‘imaginary’ homelands only provide a very limited perspective to the idea of ‘homeland’, if he is studied locally in the North East of India. In his interview with *India Today*, Rushdie claims that he is not interested in an idealised, romantic vision of India. Being an exiled intellectual, the issue of writing about India has always been to write as an outsider. His loss of the easy return to India has been an absolute and inescapable anguish. If this is true, then expecting him to address issues the way we have actually faced them in the North East of India does not make any sense.

End Notes:

¹ But, the struggle for ‘homelands’ has turned out to be a profitable business because it has helped many to meet political ends. Thus, the question of ‘homelands’ can never be ‘imaginary’, but evolves out of political, economic and ethnic problems. In the North East Indian context, ‘homeland’ issues are politically very active and they need to be addressed seriously. This also hints at the need to mobilise a new ‘identity consciousness’ against the hegemonic design of the Indian state. As Chandan Sarma discusses, the elites of the ethnic groups produce a counter hegemony rooted in their history—partly real and partly imagined on

the model of the already existing nation state. This is the starting point for the struggle for 'homeland' in order to give birth to a new ethnic identity even inside a modern nation state. I would like to relate Rushdie's "many headed monsters", in *Midnight's Children* to the simultaneous demands for recognition made by the various regional groups within North East.

² Because, the struggle for identity clearly gets reflected in the 'us and them' rhetoric that defines most of such problems. While 'they' denote the establishment, "us" the freedom fighters whose act of violence becomes a justified rage. Whether Rushdie is aware of this in the context of the North East is never clear from his works and deliberations. From a regional perspective the so-called freedom fighters are intimately connected with the political dynamics of their respective regions and their motives. But, Rushdie could have recognized this strategically important region of the South East Asia. Located between the South and South East Asia, this region is one of Asia's troubled spot. It is placed between Bangladesh, Tibet, Burma and Bhutan. 98% of the border areas of NE are international. These borders have been involved in at least three major wars – 1962, 1965 and 1971, besides other skirmishes.

³ A number of Assamese scholars and critics have been reflecting on the problems raised by identity politics and 'homeland' related issue in the North East. They include names like Chandan Sharma, Udayon Mishra and Sanjeev Baruah among others. Chandan Sharma in his essay "The Indian State and Ethnic Activities in North East India" discusses many of the problems the North Eastern states are presently facing. He argues that after the independence, India has witnessed a wide range of ethnic movements over the idea of 'self rule' – a concept which has incorporated other significant issue like autonomy within India or sovereign statehood outside India. This was possible as the obsession with a 'pan-Indian identity' sought to assimilate diverse ethnic groups into what we call National mainstream, after the independence. This has stood in the way to fulfill the economic, political and cultural aspirations of various ethnic groups fuelling further protest movements in the name of 'homelands' and 'self rule'.

⁴ My understanding of the struggles for the so-called 'homeland' in the troubled North Eastern part of India provides a scope to recapitulate many of the assumptions made by Rushdie in his essay "Imaginary Homelands". My contention is that the idea of 'homelands' in this region of Indian is not 'imaginary' but very much 'real' as this has caused terrible consequences in the recent history of the North East of India.

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