NEW ACADEMIA: *An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*

Online ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. XI, Issue III, July 2022**

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Unheeded Narratives: *Makam* and the Sino-Indian War of 1962

Prapti Kakati
M.A English, Miranda House
University of Delhi
kakatiprapti@gmail.com

Abstract

'Makam' (Chinatown Days), a 2010 novel by the Sahitya-Akademi winning author Rita Chowdhury is set against the Sino-India War of 1962 and has marked itself as a seminal text in the understanding of the war of 1962 especially in the context of North-East India. Spanning three centuries, this novel talks about the first advent of the Chinese slaves to the tea plantations in Assam, their subsequent settlement and assimilation with the local population, the war and the resultant arrests, internment and deportation of the already established Chinese communities from India. The protagonist is Mei-Lin, a second-generation Chinese immigrant, who like the rest of her community is caught up between two conflicting nations, displaced by one, disowned by the other, hence rendered stateless. The novel is a heart-rending account of the journey the people were forced to go though, from their hometown to the refugee camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, and ultimately to China. Told that they could return after the war, the displaced residents were not allowed to take any possessions with them. The once well-settled Chinese families were taken prisoners and physically attacked, their property looted, and sent in trains without food and water. The week-long journey, in extreme heat and dire conditions, saw deaths and families separated, some forever. The displaced were then taken to China, and dumped in labour camps. Considered traitors from the "enemy country" even by the Chinese, these people found themselves stripped of their identities, statehood and even their basic human rights. The text remembers various narratives and trends of nationalism and sub-nationalism that led to various forms of hostilities towards this section of the population during and after the Sino-Indian War.

Key Words: Nation, stateless migrants, war refugees, Sino-India war, Chinese settlers, Assam.

India and China have had a long history of border-conflicts, the most recent being the Galwan clashes in 2020, in which twenty Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number from Chinese PLA were killed. India, in the mid-20th Century experienced a very important exercise in nation-building, just 15 years after its newly-won independence, in the form of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The war enabled the Indian state to mark its territoriality and exercise its power as a unified state against another. As the Sino-Indian aggressions started on October 1962, the Indian government declared National Emergency. Subsequently, Dr. S Radhakrishnan signed the Defence of India Ordinance, an act of 156 rules that suspended all fundamental rights, and allowed the government to hold any person in detention without explanation, without the right to representation, and without the provisions of *Habeas corpus*. This Ordinance was followed by the Foreigners Law passed by the Indian Parliament in October 30, which was made applicable to "any person not of Indian origin who was at birth a citizen or subject of any country at war with, or committing external aggression against, India."The Foreigners (Restricted Areas) Order, which was invoked by the Indian government on January 14, 1963, "prohibited all Chinese nationals and all persons of Chinese origin from entering or remaining in designated restricted areas." "Persons of Chinese descent were required to report to Indian authorities for 'registration and classification' and residency requirements for non-citizen Chinese were made more stringent … When relationships between India and China were congenial prior to the conflict, the Chinese living in India were reassured about their Chinese citizenship. Following the border dispute, these people suddenly became visible and vulnerable, as according to the new promulgation, these people found themselves to be nationals of an enemy country." (Cohen and Leng, 274–75).

The Laws and Tribunals which emerged during the war brought about adiscourse about Indian ethno-nationalism, the definitions of Indian statehood and citizenship, and led to the construction of the Chinese settlers in India as the "Other". They were misconstrued as "aliens" and "spies" of China, sent to disrupt the national harmony and integrity of the Indian state. The Chinese state and people were painted with terms like 'Chinese double talk', 'False charges', 'Chinese falsehoods', 'Chinese deceit', 'Callous betrayal by China', 'Chinese duplicity' and 'Insult to world conscience' (GOI, EPD 1963). China was the "unabashed aggressor and 'unscrupulous opponent' that 'invaded [India's] sacred land"[1](Ministry of Information and Broadcasting)and its newly found sovereignty, to which India had to retaliate.

The Foreigner's Law against the Chinese in India also incited a series of aggressive responses from the citizens towards the Chinese population. There were widespread attacks on the Chinese nationals, their properties looted and damaged. Chinese schools and institutions, even the presswas ordered to shut down. Any attempt by the Chinese residents to extend friendship and affirm their loyalty to the Indian state was met with distrust and further harassment and name-calling. An article in The Times of India (2 November 1962) talks

about an anti-Chinese demonstration held in New Delhi where 15,000 people gathered, carrying placards with signs that said: 'Chinese, go back', 'Hands off our frontier', 'Choke the opium eaters' and 'We will crush the yellow rats'. The suspicion and hatred surrounding the Indian Chinese community can be seen in Shri U.M Trivedi's comments in the Lok Sabha in December 1962, where he rejected the community's pro-India stance, saying, "The whole question, however is, even if he becomes a citizen of India, if his parents or grandparents belong to a country which is at war with me, I have no faith in such a person.' This nationwide disdain and institutionalized hatred manifested itself gradually in the form of incarceration of the Chinese in local prisons and camps, a long-term internment at Deoli in Rajasthan, and subsequent deportation of about 2,165 Chinese residents beginning November 1962, of which more than 900 were Indian citizens. Many had to leave India immediately, being served 'Quit India' orders. These dehumanizing deportation of Chinese residents in India under the guise of preserving national security continued till December of 1967, even after five years of the war."The government of India repatriated about 1,665 Chinese internees along with their 730 dependents to China by September of 1963. Between 1962 and 1967, about 7,500 people of Chinese origin, who were not forcibly deported or repatriated, left India for China, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, UK, US and Canada among other places". The last group of internees from the Deoli camp was released as late as 1967. (Bannerjee, 447-448).

The Sino-Indian War of 1962: New Perspectives, edited by Amit R. Das Gupta and Lorenz Lüthi, provides a fresh perspective among the throes of nationalism and war-cries surrounding the contemporary war-narratives. Talking about how rigid frontiers were a Western idea imposed onto the culturally mixed South-Asia, the text claims that drawing certain lines between regions does not solve conflicts, rather aggravates it. PayalBannerjee, in her essay "The Chinese in India: Internment, nationalism, and the embodied imprints of state action" borrows from the accounts of Yin Marsh and her memoir *Doing Time with Nehru* and Kwai-Yun Li's Master's thesis "Deoli Camp: An Oral History of Chinese Indians from 1962 to 1966" to talk about the disenfranchisement of the Indian Chinese population and their deportation and incarceration at Deoli Camp in Rajasthan. Yin Marsh's father came to India in 1944 fleeing the Chinese communist revolution, and settled in Darjeeling. Marsh was still a student in Loreto convent when the school was closed for the 1962 war and her father, suspected to be a Chinese spy, was imprisoned for 15 months under the Foreigner's Act. She and her brother were interned at Deoli Camp for two and a half months. In her memoir, she recalls the atmosphere of suspicion, fear and the state-sanctioned violence they were subjected to during the entire period, to escape which her family had to migrate to the US.

Kwai Yun-Li, in her thesis "Deoli Camp: An Oral History of Chinese Indians from 1962 to 1966" interviewed four internees of Deoli -Hua, Liu, Chen and Ming, in an attempt to uncover this trauma through oral history. "When the 1962 Sino-Indian Incident started, the Assamese shunned us. We became taboo. The Assamese taunted me and all the Chinese, like

pulling the corners of their eyes upwards and shouting, ―Cheena, Cheena, Chin, Chin. Sometimes they threw stones or rotten vegetables at us and yelled at us to go home", recalls Ming (Yun-Li, 30). Her family was put up in a prison for four weeks along with criminals, before being transferred to Deoli. She describes how every information to and from the camp was censored, and a lot of letters did not reach their destinations. "The mail was censored by the camp commander and his staff. My dad used to get English language newspapers from Calcutta. Sometimes there were so many cutouts that I held the papers in front of my face and ran around the compound looking out of the holes in the newspaper. My dad … sometimes wondered what his letters looked like when he wrote to his parents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters. The Chinese language papers and letters took much longer to be delivered as the camp commander sent them to Delhi to be read by their people who could read Chinese." (Yun-Li, 40). The apathy of the government and its hypocrisy is visible in her account; she talks about how "The Indian prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, visited the camp. I remember I and other children posed for pictures beside him. I asked Shastri when we could go home. He said he would talk to his cabinet when he got back to Delhi. But I guess he forgot about us when he got back." (Yun-LI, 40).

Another seminal text pertinent to the plight of the Chinese deportees during the war of 1962 is Dilip D'Souza and Joy Ma's non-fiction *The Deoliwallahs: The True Story of the 1962 Chinese-Indian Internment*. The text begins with a simple question posed to D'Souza by a friend — did he know that India, in fact, had internment camps of its own? D'Souza writes: "Only the Nazis 'did' concentration camps, I thought until then." The book revolves around the denial of the government about the heinous treatment meted out to the Chinese citizens during the years of the war, juxtaposed with the protagonist Ma's memories of her time in Deoli, who was just a student then. The text questions the entire "idea of India" along with the more complex concepts of nationality and citizenship, and what happens to a group of people who are rendered statelessin a world of majoritarian neo-colonial democracies.

Makam opens with Lai-Lin challenging the narrator of the text"Pariba? Bharotormatittheo hoi amarkotha kobo pariba? Hahohase?" ("Do you have the courage to write about us on Bharat's (Indian)soil?"). The beginning of the 19th Century saw debilitating famines crippling China, especially the Southern parts. The novel opens with Lailin's ancestor, Hu Han's parents selling off their children to the Chinese overlords for just a bag of rice. The famine affected people, especially the impoverished young men were lured into slavery by these masters, or the people from the British East India Company, who brought them to Assam and other tea-plantations in West Bengal as indentured labourers. Hu Han was one amongst them. The labourers gradually married local women or brought their families to the country and established settlements, like the town of Makum in Assam. The Assamese and Chinese assimilation in this region gradually gave rise to a composite culture. The prosperous Chinatown in Makum had a Chinese language school, Chinese restaurants, grocery stores and shoe shops, and a Chinese club with swimming pool. But the people knew local tribal

languages, communicated in Assamese, and celebrated hybrid festivals with customs borrowed from all sides and communities.

This Assamese-Chinese peaceful coexistence is symbolized by the protagonist, Mei-Lin, who is of Chinese descent, and her marriage to Pulak Baruah, an Assamese man. She wears *mekhela-chadar,* the ethnic Assamese wear. They get married following Assamese rituals, but also celebrate the Chinese New Year. However, as the war progresses, these relationships and the idyllic coexistence in the town gets disrupted. What started as sympathy for the Chinese population from the natives soon turned into suspicion and hatred, so much that Mei-Lin's father-in-law falsely reported her for engaging in espionage, leading to her arrest. The elders in the community began to be viewed with suspicion. "K P Lin, Makmin, Chi Hui, Hyun Yin-Ki … all of them are Chinese CIDs. Bastards!" (Chaudhari, 254). The Chinese people had to publicly pledge their allegiance to the Indian state. "We will have to declare that we are with the Indian government, else we will be misunderstood by the people as well as the government. A meeting is to be held, invite all the elders of the community" (Chaudhari, 270). Demonstrations were held in Makum where the youth pledged their help for the Indian Army, but the students from the Chinese schools were not invited, rather the children who studied with the Assamese students in other schools were viewed with suspicion. This internal unrest soon gave way to the detention of the Chinese people, who were suddenly rounded up and held in a cowshed, to "protect them from violence". "They picked up all the Indian Chinese early one morning in November 1962 and packed us in a cowshed, reminisces Wang Shing Tung, former Makum schoolmaster Wang Shu Shin's son, who was then seven years old. ―The police said they would jail us for 'safety'. No one was allowed to carry any money, food, clothes or ornaments. Fortunes amassed over four generations — the Chinese had come as tea garden workers but some had become successful businessmen — were decimated in a single day … A month later, in December 1962, the detained were gathered from all the jails and cowsheds and marched onto a train to the Deoli internment camp, Rajasthan. It took seven days for them to reach Deoli in a heavily guarded train that did not stop at any station, lest the 'enemies' should escape. Half-cooked khichdi (rice, lentil and vegetables simmered in a pot) was served on the way, but some of the 11 elderly Chinese could not take the trauma and died before they reached their destination. (Chaudhuri, 2010).

The novel gives a heart-rending account of the trauma and the massive human-rights violation the internees faced during the train ride to Deoli, in the camp, and when they were deported via ships to China. Not given any proper food or water, people had to drink water from the toilets in the train to survive. Their letters remained undelivered and censored. The government remained apathetic and ruthless even upon the dehumanizing deaths of hundreds. After months of imprisonment, the Chinese government declared that they would be taking the Indian Chinese into their country, officially starting the deportation process. Mei Lin and her people were again pushed into three days of ruthless travel in dehumanizing condition to

the port of Madras, where there were ships waiting to take them to China – the 'Chin-Hua' and 'Guang-Hua'. The Chinese state formed an 'Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission', and the refugees were received under the 'National Committee of Receiving Returned Overseas Chinese'. As they landed in China, these people were subjected to further verbal abuse by the local Chinese. Called "traitors", "Hakui (black ghost)" etc., they heard hateful comments everywhere, "You evil foreigner, why have you come to our country? Go back to where you've come from! Don't come begging to us when you've been chased off like mongrels from India" (Chaudhari, 502).

From these refugee centres, the children were sent to the Chinese schools where they would be indoctrinated with the communist ideology, while the adults were sent away to work in factories, and farms in Jiayi. Mei Lin was separated from her husband in Assam, from her father during the Chinese segregation of refugees, and sent away pregnant and ill to work in the farm under inhumane conditions, where they had to carry human faeces to farms as manure. Their hopes of assimilation with the Chinese people were crushed because of the hostility they faced from their end. "The farm was in a state of constant tension. The locals perceived the people like Mei-Lin as illegal immigrants there to steal their land. There would be confrontations, verbal abuse, and their produce and clothes would be stolen from time to time…" (Chaudhari, 516).

Hundreds lost their lives. Families were separated, never to see each other again. Some people landed in the hands of contractual marriages to find freedom from these prison-like farms, only to find them working in further debilitating conditions as house-help or in restaurants in Hong-Kong. The Chinese population in India was scattered into a million pieces spreading all over the world. Mei-Lin, while recalling the traumatic past, laments, "After so many years, I have finally met someone from my Assam. … After a long time, I feel like I have met family, someone my own. Why didn't anyone come looking for us in the last 45 years? Does no one remember us?" (Chaudhari, 587).

Mei-Lin's words are a reverberation of the various accounts of the war that have been brought into light in the recent years, but have landed in deaf years as there seems to be no trace of acknowledgement or apology from the Indian state towards theChinese people, wrongfully captured, tortured and deported.

From 1962 to 1967, more than 7,000 Chinese left India, a country that had been their home for generations. When the last remaining Chinese returned to their homes, they found their houses occupied and businesses taken over by Indians, and their properties auctioned off claiming to be "enemy properties" by the government. Many of them immigrated to other countries, while some left for Calcutta to escape their vilification in the small towns. The erstwhile rapidly developing Chinese communities were shattered. Today, only few families remain in Makum. The traces of the Chinese settlement have faded in the last five decades, but the trauma has persisted through generations.

The British imperial system in the Indian sub-continent demarcated a "formal border between British India and China, which disrupted the notion of a 'porous' border based on cultural or traditional understandings (between the two regions) … The future independent Indian state would inherit this imperial border and deploy it to define the nation's territoriality, which was invoked during the war to forge a national identity." (Bannerjee, 442) The people who did not fulfill the geographical and ethnic criteria required by the Indian state were hence incarcerated, disenfranchised, stripped of their homes and states and turned into helpless refugees. Georgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* has argued that the refugee 'is nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to man-citizen link'(134). In the context of *Makam*, the treatment of the Indo-Chinese population by the Indian state subverts the ideological narratives of a welfarist-state like India and its transition from a colony to a neo-imperialist force which put upon itself the power to deport citizens of its own.

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