

The Dilemma and Quest for Identity in Siddhartha Deb's *Surface*.

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Abstract

Siddhartha Deb's Surface is an engrossing tale of self discovery that the protagonist Amrit Singh embarks on in a 'region' shrouded in mystery. As Amrit takes his journey through the hilly terrain, he seeks to salvage his dreary reporting job and in that process, manages to find answers to satiate his existential angst. The 'region' poses many challenges to him, an 'outsider' unoblivious to the happenings in and around. Amrit gains new perspectives of looking at life in its myriad forms while unlearning many pre-conceived notions that he presumably had about the 'region'. As the 'region' has always been considered a 'land of conflicts', the conflicts and political turmoil enabled Amrit, an 'outsider' from 'mainland India' find his worth and identity in the arduous process of unearthing knowledge from the hinterland. Life is about learning and unlearning the many undercurrents that shape and give meaning and purpose to it. What happens on the surface is not what actually it is underneath. This is the dilemma one undergoes when in pursuit of happiness and contentment in life. Amrit's journey through the enchanting land provides him the answers he sought and what he needed too.

History is witness to the fact that various cultures and ethnicities have contributed in enriching India's pluralistic character. India is rich in its traditions and is culturally vibrant owing to the presence of multiple cultures of diverse origins. As such, India maintains the identity of being one of the largest propagator and facilitator of multiculturalism. Multiple cultures and ethnicities have been accommodated, absorbed and have become an indispensable part of the nation's cultural identity throughout history. The hybridity further add to a unique aesthetic sense in the plural make up of the country. (Nanda, 1.)

Moving towards the Northeastern part of India, the heterogeneity and hybridity of culture is seen with more intricacy owing to the presence of diverse microscopic indigenous populations belonging to different ethnic groups. Moreover, owing to the strategic location of the region, the political climate is awashed with issues that demand a more sensitive approach and careful handling than the other parts of India. Northeast India's frontier is surrounded by Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Bhutan, stretching over nearly 1,450 kilometers. (Shimray,

2.) Thus, the presence of diverse cultures within the region and beyond the borders, create a symbiotic identity of sorts that problematises the territorial issue. Yet the pluralistic feature of the cultural identity of the region transcends the political-social turmoil and keeps evolving and changing. In the given political set up, there are sectors which are still surviving in a harmonious sync and are culturally connected to one another. This living together of the different cultures has not only rendered Northeast India a unique entity but has also established the fact that the belongingness to the same land surpasses the politics of the times. Yet the dilemma of identity that the people belonging to this region carry gets clearly reflected in various art forms including literature.

By and large the 'mainstream' population considers the Northeast a 'land of conflicts', but very few go beyond them to understand the situations that lead to social and political unrest. (Shimray, 1) The geographical and ethnic diversity adds to the difference in economic sector that invariably leads to political conflicts. The internal dynamics has to be understood and worked upon to settle the dilemma and establish identity.

Literature is a subtle representation of culture in an artistic form. It works in such a way to enable ideas to propagate through barriers of time and space. In today's postcolonial and post-secular societies, the recognition of differences and awareness of intersections of factors of identity making are crucial tools in analyzing social and cultural relations. Literature also helps to explore the possibilities and realms that induce an individual's thought process to imbibe social institutions and understandings of identity. Writings from Northeast India too play such a role where ideas are facilitated through the medium of literary musings. The range of such writings is tremendous with the initial goal of bringing the people and their experiences more fully into knowledge and power. Given the political climate, there is always an unmitigated expectation that the writings are responses or mirror to the angst created by the turmoil and upheavals. True to some extent, the writings also respond and contribute to the formation of social identities and challenges as well.

Writings from the North East are not just about conflicts. The almost impenetrable iron curtain that has ostracised mainland India from its vibrant North Eastern (NE) region also ensconced it in a one-dimensional political enclosure of conflicts. To think that writers hailing from the NE only have political conflicts and insurgencies to talk about is being reactionary...(the Hindu, July 28, 2016)

One such prolific writer hailing from the region is Siddhartha Deb whose works has mesmerised and promoted the land in the literary circles. *Surface* is an engrossing tale of self discovery that takes the reader into depths never delved before. Siddhartha Deb's story is about 'the region', the territory and of his protagonist Amrit Singh's journey into the region, the Northeast India. Amrit Singh is a dissatisfied reporter for a crumbling Calcutta newspaper *Sentinel*, who gets dispatched to 'the region' to do a series of stories for the paper

and explore the possibilities of setting up a new edition of the newspaper there. His is a lost entity losing out on life as a whole. He is reluctant to go at first yet to salvage his dreary job; he sets out on a journey into the unknown terrain that becomes a metaphor for a remarkable voyage of self-discovery and self-realisation. The shadowy, almost 'dream-like' region is turned to vivid life with specific and well-chosen physical details in the course of the reporter's quest for truth. The surface of the land provides him with many stories and experiences that completely change his outlook towards the region and life in larger detail. He meets and learns from the new culture he explores that induces in him the zeal required of him to complete the task he had set out for. Though apprehensive at first, he finds that the surface is not what it seems like and the seething undercurrent beneath it is something much more than what is readily comprehensible. Amrit uncovers multiple layers of embedded meanings from the region shrouded in mystery that quenches his thirst for knowledge as he also understands the multifaceted meanings of life. He has never set foot into the 'region' before and therefore takes a journey that develops into a discovery of the unknown and unheard with gruelling details and perspectives of his own. He undergoes many revelations that enlightens not only the case that he is pursuing but his own outlook towards life is changed forever. The culture shock and confusion that engulfs him on his entry into the new territory and also the hilly terrain that shakes him all along his journey throughout the land makes him realise as well as appreciate the diversity that nature has bestowed the land with. He also realises himself and his self worth as he pursues the story that he was sent to unearth.

Too many unlikely events had come together in the brief to find the woman in the picture: Sarkar's sudden assignment for me, the discovery of the photograph, the meeting with Herman the German more than a year ago now. There was no common thread between any of these disparate events, nothing other than me, as if I had pulled them all together unknowingly, like some magnet that doesn't comprehend how or why it attracts metal. (Surface, 24)

It dawned on Amrit that life was larger and beyond what he was living until then. He realised his identity when he actually stepped out of his 'home' and made an approach to acknowledge the presence and existence of the other. His routine life had seemed to him, 'A life without shape, almost without meaning.' Amrit discovers the region on his own and narrates many things – cultures and practices that appalled and baffled him. He informs of the slow development of the places, the bad roads, the low voltage electricity and the cheap quality standards of life as a whole. He also makes his observations that the people were divided along the ethnic lines very distinctly. *Surface* presents events that showcase the cultural uniqueness as well as cultural affinity of the people to their land. As Amrit takes his journey through the hilly terrain, he seeks to salvage his dreary reporting job and in that process, manages to find answers to satiate his existential angst. The 'region' poses many challenges to him, an 'outsider' unoblivious to the happenings in and around. Amrit gains

new perspectives of looking at life in its myriad forms while unlearning many pre-conceived notions that he presumably had about the 'region'. As the 'region' has always been considered a 'land of conflicts', the conflicts and political turmoil enabled Amrit, an 'outsider' from 'mainland India' find his worth and identity in the arduous process of unearthing knowledge from the hinterland.

Amrit had contacts with Herman, a supposed representative of a German magazine regarding the story behind a photograph of a young woman he had found in the filing room of his newspaper office. In the photograph, the young woman was between two armed and masked men, and a note was at the back from MORLS- Movement Organized to Resuscitate the Liberation Struggle, an insurgent group that claimed that she was a porn actress and had been shot as a punishment. Amrit had plans to uncover the truth behind the photograph and report it to Herman, who would consider giving him a job with the German newspaper. Amrit sets off on a long trek to Imphal, from Dimapur through Kohima and then to Moreh on the Manipur-Myanmar border. He encounters several stories along his journey about the young woman, and several others like the charismatic Malik shapes his construction of the land and its people to a great deal.

The land that was so daunting to him at first showed a different understanding of not only his own existence but also of the region that was so mysterious to him. He uncovers enough interest and intrigue in the region despite several illusions and delusions, fronts and set-ups along his journey.

I had finished more than half my journey, and was at most three or four days from Imphal. The road snaked down southwards on the map, although I would be going up into the North-eastern Hills to reach Kohima, the highway continuing along the spine of the hills before it descended into the Imphal Valley in Manipur. The space looked intimate on paper, an area thick with lines and dots and strange names, but when I followed Highway 39 beyond Imphal to the border town of Moreh, the map changed character. Across the border, in Burma, it was all blankness. (120.)

One keen observation by Amrit Singh is when he notices the dress or attires of the people in the region. He realises that the people have internalised their culture and that the dress has become a sort of identity marker as well as a cultural determiner yet he reminds of the origin of the attire in itself which reveals that however celebrated a culture may be, it is an acquired phenomenon.

A Khasi teenage girl and her mother sat in front of me in the bus, both of them in the distinctive tartan checks brought to their people by Welsh and Scottish missionaries over a century ago. It was a reminder of the influences that were still playing themselves out in the region, the ideas of civilization brought by

missionaries, colonial officials and Indian civil servants. In this case, at least, the result hadn't been violent. They had made the pattern their own, I thought, but then my interest in tribal mores gave way to irritation. (98)

There were more horns and shouts as we came across the army checkpoints that kept their barriers lowered resolutely, a steady accretion of stimuli that signalled we were in Dimapur. There were more Mongoloid faces here among the drivers waiting to pick up fares for Kohima, more jeans and boots and pullovers and jackets on the bodies of the passengers. This was the end of the plains; the road ahead went up to the mountains.(102)

Surface also has elements that reveal the last lingering traces of the erstwhile colonial presence in the Northeast region. This has, not very surprisingly affected the culture and ways of the people and the land to a great extent. The places marked with the memory of the colonial masters and their occupations with the land are regarded with value till today. This tends to be more of a psychological affinity than physical likeness. Deb tries to bring in a historical element by including the story of a diary of the last British editor of the Sentinel. It was a printed volume written in 1946 that was about the conversations the diarist had with a British soldier who was haunted by the experiences of the WWII when the Japanese invaded the Northeast India. Amrit had removed the diary along with the photograph from the filing room of his newspaper office. As he reads the account, Amrit begins to realize that the region hasn't changed much. The fictional narrative indeed has its seeds from the actual true memoirs of newsmen who provide important background information and details of the WWII campaign on India's northeast front. The journey unfolds very slowly matching the physical difficulty of travelling on the land surface of the hilly terrain. The landslides on the highway leading to Imphal interrupt smooth travel.

The insurgents had been in the region in one form or another for nearly four decades, crystallizing around different ethnic and tribal identities as a distant government in Delhi alternated between neglect and brute force. This city by the river and its uncertain state of siege was only the most recent symbol in a series of secessionist wars, some of them as old as modern India itself. As I travelled deeper into the interior, I would find myself travelling a route riven by conflict, with shadowy armies meeting each other in fierce but inconclusive encounters.

Much of the region had been treated as different from the rest of India by the British, divided by an Inner Line that only colonial officials and Christian missionaries could cross freely. It was an area of perpetual separation, a museum collection of tribal territories and princely states curated by a resident commissioner, and by the time of independence the notional line had become an unbreachable wall. The politicians and administrators in Delhi who determined

how the region would fare in the fledging nation should have anticipated this barrier, but their knowledge was partial, their lack of imagination absolute.

(*Surface*, 31)

Amrit uncovers the truth that he was seeking in the heart of an area of darkness while uncovering the truth of the land. The land long plagued by several groups of insurgents is either neglected or treated brutally by the government in New Delhi. It created a sense of difficulty in identifying with the land for Amrit, who had never been there. The consciousness of being an 'outsider' resulted in a discovery of self and also to discover new truths about the land. It discerns the truth about the nation state and the human soul in equal measure. Amrit discerns that surfaces are concealed under other surfaces as he unfolds the region's mysteries and realities beneath the surface. The politics overlaps and turns pluralistic in context and interconnected with others.

Life is about learning and unlearning the many undercurrents that shape and give meaning and purpose to it. What happens on the surface is not what actually it is underneath. This is the dilemma one undergoes when in pursuit of happiness and contentment in life. Amrit's journey through the enchanting land provides him the answers he sought and what he needed too. Amrit's quest for identity through the unknown terrain served to provide him with answers he had been seeking for himself all his life. His dilemma of identity and existence was quenched when he satiated himself with the new found freedom and knowledge. It gave him power to think and ignited his zeal for life. The cultural plurality of the region enhanced his understanding of life. The hilly terrain, the surface provided him the much needed space where he was able to find his worth and purpose. He 'found' himself in the place where he had initially thought he was a lost cause.

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