



CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND THE CHINESE-ASSAMESE IDENTITY IN RITA CHOWDHURY'S *MAKAM*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the process of cultural assimilation and the impact of international relations on shaping the identity of the Chinese-Assamese community in Rita Chowdhury's Assamese novel *Makam* (2012). By examining the historical framework of the Chinese labourers recruited during the British colonial period to work in the tea plantations of the newly colonised Assam, the paper explores how these immigrants adjusted to a new environment despite initial difficulties, language barriers, and cultural differences. Utilising the frameworks of Henri Bunle, Walter Hirsch, and I.I. Kavass, the paper analyses the dynamics of migration, including voluntary and involuntary migration, the push-pull effect, and the forces that govern immigrant assimilation. It details how the offspring of these labourers integrated into the local population, creating a unique Indo-Chinese (Chinese-Assamese community to be more precise) by adopting the culture, customs, and language of Assam. Furthermore, the paper contextualises this assimilation within broader geopolitical shifts, including the changing dynamics of India-China, China-Myanmar, and India-Myanmar relationships, the McMahon line dispute, and the principles of coexistence. The study shows how infrastructure like roads supports both border trade and migration patterns, while also acting as a catalyst for forging cultural connections. Through characters like Ho Han and Mei Lin, the paper illustrates the hardships of forced deportation of people of the Chinese-Assamese community to Hong Kong following the Sino-India conflict of 1962. It examines the complex nature of identity formation, showing that while immigrants adapt to their destination, they carry a preserved love for their roots, language, and memories, resulting in a unique blending of cultures within a broad social context.

Keywords- Cultural assimilation, migration, Chinese-Assamese, tea plantations, international relations, Sino-Indian War

I. Introduction

This paper engages in a close reading of Rita Chowdhury's novel *Makam* (2010) through the lens of cultural assimilation and the ways in which international relations impact cultural assimilation. First published in Assamese and later translated into English as *Chinatown Days*, *Makam* is a historical novel that offers the portrayal of the Chinese-Assamese community—from their initial migration into the newly colonised British province of Assam to work as labourers in the newly established tea plantations to their settlement in Assam and assimilation into Assamese society to their arrest and eventual detainment and interned, and (in several cases) later deported from India in the wake of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The novel offers a fictionalised account of two centuries of this Chinese Assamese experience that ends with accusations of, being interned and detained in camps like Deoli, and in some cases wrongful expulsion from India as Chinese spies during the Sino-Indian War.

Rimli Basu discusses the rivalry between India and China as a significant aspect of international politics of the South Asian region. Positive political relations help shape the strategies of nation-states and, in the context of globalisation, contribute towards broader economic, social, and cultural interactions. Maintaining cordial relations with neighbouring countries provides a foundation for economic development, social exchange, and political cooperation. The evolving relations between India and China demonstrate the structural positioning of regional powers that are not only connected through political relations, but also through historical and cultural exchange. (Basu 664).

However, it is significant that political independence from the British also influenced frameworks of co-existence in the South Asian region. In addition to diplomatic relations, establishment of industries, economic factors, and infrastructure development play a crucial role in migration and cross-cultural interaction and assimilation. Migratory movements occur due to various reasons, including search of food, shelter, employment, and better living conditions. Such movements can be understood through the push-pull framework of migration. Such movement is either voluntary or involuntary, depending upon the circumstances and opportunities. Henri Bunle observes that “migratory movement always involve a big majority of adult males” (5). In *Makam*, it is seen that Ho Han, along with other male migrants, migrate voluntarily to Calcutta, but are subsequently forced to come to Assam; their movement towards Assam is thus involuntary. These migrants settle at Makum in Upper Assam, and even after the end of British rule they and their families remain behind. Over time, descendants of such Chinese labourers develop social and cultural ties with the land where they live for generations, giving rise to the Chinese-Assamese community and broadly the Indo-Chinese community.

In the novel, the initial arrival of the Chinese migrants in Assam, especially in Makum is marked by various challenges, including wage disputes and language barriers. Differences in language and ethnicity makes adaptation to the new environment difficult. This process through which migrants adjust to a new environment is commonly referred to as immigrant assimilation. According to Bunle, assimilation refers to the process by which an individual becomes part of the receiving community and “resembles its inhabitants,

as closely as can be, in certain essential points” resulting in severing “all legal and political ties with the country of origin” (6). He further argues that

an immigrant is assimilated only when he speaks the language of his new country by preference, has adopted its customs, and when his general conduct and way of life become those of his new compatriots and his original outlook gives way to that of his new surroundings” (Bunle 6).

Thus assimilation becomes possible when immigrants view their destination as their own social and cultural space. This involves learning the language prevalent, adopting the cultural practice, and identifying themselves as members of the host society. Through his discussion of immigrant assimilation, Bunle further identifies four forces that influence the lives of immigrants and their experience of workplace and broader social institutions. Bunle emphasises that relations between immigrants and host communities are interactions between “person, namely, immigrants and native inhabitants, and with active and anonymous agencies in the form of governmental and administrative authorities both in the native and the receiving country” (7). This highlights the role of both individual actors and institutional structures in facilitating or hindering the process of assimilation. Bunle also highlights the difficulties faced by people who migrate with their children and spouses. In *Makam*, the character Mei Lin when deported from India, is shown to be pregnant which makes her journey particularly arduous. Despite much hardship, many members of the Chinese-Assamese community migrate to Hong Kong. Mei Lin marries a resident of Hong Kong and this decision helps ensure her social and economic stability in a new environment. The novel shows how as a Chinese Assamese (a descendent of a Chinese immigrant to colonial Assam), Mei Lin struggles to adjust to life in (unfamiliar) Hong Kong. Though initially unfamiliar to the language of Hong Kong, after spending considerable time, she gradually adapts to the linguistic and cultural environment of Hong Kong. And yet, within her, she continues to cherish her love for Assam and her emotional attachment to the Assamese language. Mei Lin’s experience as depicted in *Makam* illustrates the complex nature of assimilation, in which migrants adopt aspects of a new culture while maintaining connections to their place of origin.

The recruitment of Chinese labourers to newly colonised Assam via Calcutta further highlights the porosity and permeability of borders and movement of people across regions. Labourers recruited from China initially encountered many difficulties upon their arrival at Assam. Differences in climate, social customs, language, and food habits made adaptation difficult. Although they were provided with food, clothing, and shelter, the process of adjusting to an unfamiliar environment often resulted in both physical and psychological hardship. However, slowly these labourers began to adapt to their surroundings and became integrated to the society. These experiences are reflected in *Makam* and this suggests that assimilation is not a uniform process but one that varies based on the migrants’ background, circumstances, and the host environment. Despite maintaining memories of their ancestral homeland, these migrants gradually became integrated into Assamese society through language, occupation, social interaction, and everyday cultural practices. And yet, at several places, the novel hints that such assimilation was neither complete nor uncomplicated. The Chinese-Assamese remained vulnerable to exclusion and this was instantiated by the kind of behaviour they faced in their own homeland (Assam) during the Sino-Indian war.

Adaptation to colonial rule can also be understood as a form of cultural assimilation involving the acceptance of colonial institutions, customs, and systems of governance. Such assimilation may be viewed within the framework of an inter-imperial zone, where the exercise of colonial power shaped the social and cultural behaviour of colonised populations. In *Makam* while such portrayal is offered, it becomes undeniable that such experiences may contribute towards anti-colonial sentiments, specially in places like Hong Kong (where the character Mei Lin migrates to from Assam and eventually settles in). As noted in “Theorizing Hong Kong”, from eighteenth century onwards, “Chinese settlers had become active collaborators of the European colonizers in South Asia by virtue of their business knowledge and networks” (Hon-Fai Chen 180). As a consequence, Hong Kong became a home to migrants from South China as well as other parts of Southeast Asia. Hong Kong also became home to many of the Indo-Chinese community who were deported from India in the wake of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. This includes the more than fifteen hundred Chinese-Assamese from Makum who were detained, imprisoned, or sent to internment camps like the Deoli internment camp. Though some were eventually deported, most others were released, of whom many migrated to Hong Kong or resettled elsewhere in India.

The experience of Chinese labourers in Assam in the initial days of the tea industry’s presence in nineteenth century Assam demonstrates how cultural assimilation occurs through everyday practice and economic activities. Working on tea plantations enabled Chinese labourers to share their knowledge, skill, tools, and stories related to tea cultivation and production. Thus, tea became more than a commodity; it became a medium of cultural exchange and cultural assimilation that connected people across cultures and across time. Apart from working as labourers in the tea plantations, Chinese migrants were seen as a support system towards the growth of the tea industry and the construction of houses as well owing to their immaculate craftsmanship of wood. There are references to such craftsmanship that characterised the architecture of the homes of Chinese-Assamese in *Makam* as well.

While examining cultural assimilation, it is necessary to discuss Sino-Indian relations that remained largely cordial until disputes concerning the McMahon Line emerged. Religion had long played a significant role in fostering friendly relations between India and China, as both nations were historically connected through Buddhism. This also had an impact on Chiang Kai-shek and Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of building stronger relations between India and China and China’s support towards the attainment of India’s freedom from British rule (Ghoble 834). However, after India attained independence and mostly during 1949, tensions began to emerge as “Tibetans also asked Indians to return the territory that the British had taken from them” (Ghoble 836). Simultaneously, the Chinese government insisted that India acknowledge China’s claims over territories under its control and reaffirm Tibet’s status as integral part of China. These developments drew criticism towards Nehru’s foreign policy with China. Despite mounting tensions, however, India continued to view China as a friendly neighbour for much of the 1950s. The maps published by India in 1948 and 1950 (the white papers on Indian States) depicted the McMahon line in the eastern part of India as the established border while labeling the middle and western sectors (including Aksai Chin) as undefined boundary. Even till 1959, Nehru did not respond to China’s claim on the regions near the McMahon line. Sir Henry McMahon British India’s foreign secretary drew the 1360 km border (that came to be known as McMahon line) on a map

in 1914 in the presence of British, Tibetan, and Chinese delegates. The Chinese Government had eventually refused to accept the line and historically the Chinese has never accepted the McMahon line.

The consequences of this political conflict are vividly portrayed in *Makam*. The novel aptly demonstrates how diplomatic tensions between nation-states (India and China) impacted the lives of the people, especially the Indo-Chinese and in the more immediate context of the novel, the Chinese Assamese community. Although many members of the community had lived in India for generations, spoke local languages, and had established social and economic ties with Assamese society, they were suddenly viewed with suspicion after the outbreak of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Through the experiences of characters such as Mei Lin and her family, Chowdhury reveals the fragile nature of assimilation, showing how political developments can undermine a sense of belonging that has been built over decades. The novel thus highlights the tension between cultural integration and national identity, illustrating how individuals who have successfully assimilated into a society may nevertheless remain vulnerable to exclusion during periods of political crisis.

Walter Hirsch discusses assimilation through three principal dimensions:

1. Differences in definitions of the concept;
2. Differences in definitions of kindred concepts, viz., accommodation, acculturation, adaptation, adjustment and amalgamation, and the consequent effects on the definition of assimilation;
3. Differences between the definitions of the concept and the actual process of assimilation. (35)

Hirsch also describes “a concept of community as a function of likemindedness” (36). Thus, assimilation involves the formation of social bonds through shared experiences, collective memories, and shared sentiments. Instead of being a singular process, assimilation is the result of multiple social, cultural, and psychological processes through which diverse individuals become part of a larger community, involving interactions among people of diverse cultural backgrounds who gradually develop mutual understanding and social interdependence. Consequently, a conscious willingness to engage with and accept another culture becomes an important element in the process of cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation is to be understood as a process through which immigrants adapt to the environment, language, customs, values, and social practices of the host society. I.I. Kavass discusses the formation of culture through migration and defines assimilation as “remoulding and reshaping of the immigrant until he becomes completely indistinguishable from the rest of the population” (55). However, complete assimilation remains difficult to achieve because migrants often retain emotional, cultural, and historical ties to their place of origin. Elements of their original culture continue to survive within personal memories, family traditions, and community practices. The immigrants’ re-adjustment and re-establishment within the space that they migrated into reflects their way of accepting the new culture.

These complexities are reflected in *Makam*, where members of the Chinese-Assamese community adopt Assamese language, customs, and ways of life while simultaneously preserving memories of their Chinese heritage. Their identities emerge not from the abandonment of one culture in favour of another but from the blending of multiple cultural influences. Such experiences demonstrate that assimilation is often accompanied by the creation of hybrid identities that combine elements of both the homeland and the host

society. The active participation of immigrants in the social, economic, and cultural life of the receiving community reflects a process of social integration and re-establishment. Thus, assimilation may be understood as a continuous process of adjustment through which migrants negotiate between preserving their cultural roots and embracing the norms and values of their adopted society, ultimately contributing to the formation of new and complex identities.

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