

Reorienting India's Northeast as Borderland: A Critical Reading of Siddhartha Deb's *Surface* (*An Outline of a Republic*)

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Abstract

The discourse on India's Northeast navigates the tension between local representation and epistemological challenges, as writers engage with and resist stereotypes. The rise of Anglophone literature and social science studies from the region counters stereotypical, oversimplified views rooted in colonial and postcolonial narratives. The persistence of colonial stereotypes, such as exoticism and racial profiling in perceptions of India's Northeast is manifested in the mainstream representation of people from this region, as well as the ongoing postcolonial conflicts over territoriality and rights. Therefore, Northeast India's identity as a borderland persists from colonial times into post-independence, shaping its governance, perception, and role within India. While post-colonial studies are seen as challenging Western narratives about the "other," it is crucial to analyse how post-colonial states and societies impose hegemonies on their own minorities. This paper aims to shift focus from post/colonial discourse by highlighting the subaltern's assertion of subject positions through a literary analysis of Siddhartha Deb's novel *Surface (An Outline of a Republic)* (2005). The paper explores how regional identities assert themselves and demonstrate agency, and seeks to challenge the dominant perspective on marginalized places and peoples.

Keywords: Northeast India, borderland, colonial stereotypes, post-colonial identities, subaltern subject

Introduction: Constructing the In-Between—Northeast India from Empire's Edge to National Borderland

The Northeast region of India is considered a borderland because of its conceptualization as a liminal zone between "South Asia" and "Southeast Asia," and its geopolitical significance in functioning as a crossroad between India and its international neighbours. This region is sandwiched between five nations (Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan, and Nepal), and connected to the rest of India's "mainland" only by a narrow corridor enclosed by Bangladesh and Nepal. Consequently, the region takes an unusual shape on a political map, protruding from the country like "an inconvenient outlier that is regulated to an inset" (van Schendel, 2002, p. 625). According to Wouters and Subba (2013), the region's depiction on the Indian map—both as a part of the country and outside its borders—has partially contributed to the general public's ignorance of the area and its people. This has led a prestigious national magazine to describe the area as "On the map but off the mind" (*Tehelka*, 2006). Although the region is undoubtedly a crucial component of India's political map, many Indians appear to be very unsure about the region's status in the political system and the people who call it home (Wouters & Subba, 2013).

Tunyi and Wouters (2016) have argued that contrary to the common assumption, Northeast India's configuration as an extreme borderland in present times was "neither natural nor inevitable" (p. 2). In concordance with Phanjoubam (2009), who viewed the present construction of Northeast India as "the residual fallout of colonial politics and administration" (Phanjoubam, p. 158), they adopted a historical approach to understanding the current geo-political position of Northeast India. This is particularly true as it was through partition that Northeast India became "saddled with an unlikely territorial shape, linked to the rest of India only by a narrow corridor between Nepal and East-Pakistan/Bangladesh" (Van Schendel, 2011, 32). In his book *Durable Disorder* (2005), Sanjib Baruah claims that the redrawing of maps in postcolonial Northeast India was a "failure" since it was carried out without taking into account the pre-colonial boundaries of different ethnic tribes. The situation deteriorated when territories labelled as "excluded areas," "partially excluded areas," or "un-administered areas" under British rule were placed under cartographic design and designated as "borderlands" post-independence.

According to James C. Scott (2010), this frontier space was termed an “illegible space”—a non-state space under the colonial monopoly of administrative, economic and cultural control (pp. 4-5). The process of relegating the region as a periphery has been concomitantly linked with the subjugation of its inhabitants as savages, uncivilized and wild. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) concept of borders and borderlands is applicable in critiquing the marginalization of Northeast Indians. She views borderland spaces as unstable and malleable, emphasizing the experience of being “in-between” geographically, culturally, or socially. While often linked to diasporic identities, this concept also applies to tribal communities whose ties to land and culture are disrupted by globalisation and national boundaries. According to Anzaldúa: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (p. 25). Anzaldúa’s concept of the inhabitants living in the borderlands as people living beyond the confines of the “normal” reflects a similar historical treatment meted out to the indigenous/tribal people of Northeast India in relation to its colonial frontier governance and post-colonial borderland dynamics.

Theoretically speaking, this paper is situated within the framework of understanding how the “other” organizes “seeing,” which is a key subject in ethnic studies and identity studies. As such, it engages in both the “seen” as an object and how that perception is articulated by the subject. Drawing upon post-colonial works (like Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, 1979) that have attempted to decipher the “rules of engagement” that exist between the “West” and the “rest,” as well as between the colonial and colonised worlds (Sahlins, 1999), the concept of “orientalism” continues in India’s interaction with its periphery despite the absence of “formal” colonialism in the post-colonial era (Pachau, 2014, p. 32). The Northeast region is not only a colonial construct in terms of its fixed geographical demarcation, but also how these demarcations attributed not only a territorial separation but also a form of life that is different from the other. For instance, Bodhisattva Kar in his essay, “When was the Postcolonial?” (2009) described how the indigenous people inhabiting these borderland areas “were seen as belonging to a different time regime—where the law of the time did not apply; where slavery, headhunting, and nomadism could be allowed to exist” (Kar, 2009, p. 52). This ideology of treating the people from the Northeast as “the Other” is reflected even today in

the policies of the central government, which is still largely influenced by a national security-centric discourse.

Thus, the construction of the Northeast as a frontier in colonial India and its subsequent alteration into a borderland in postcolonial India has been founded upon its marginalized position. This transformation of the Northeast colonial frontier into a post-colonial borderland has often been emphasized in the critical works of the region (Bhaumik, 2010; Misra, 2011). K. B. Veio Pou, in his book *Literary Cultures of India's Northeast* (2015), writes that the Northeast is seen as "India's post-colonial 'other'", which explains the relations of unequal power and politics between the Centre and the perceived "troubled periphery." This oppositional politics of location leads to the exercise of control, domination and hegemony by the advantaged Centre on the one hand, while the disadvantaged periphery resorts to assertion and competition for space and position on the other. Veio Pou (2015) aptly quotes Satpathy's observation in relation to this: "In India's political imaginary the term [Northeast] serves to describe a region that is both *mysterious and dangerous*. Historically it is somewhat unknown; a 'heart of darkness'" (p. 1).

From Wilderness to Watch-Post: Postcolonial Identity and the Borderland Condition

Siddhartha Deb's novel *Surface (An Outline of a Republic* is the extended title in the US Edition) (2005) inserts itself as part of the global narrative chain by showing the continuities between the modes of governing colonial frontiers and post-colonial borderlands. There is an intertextual element of the novel with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, which illustrates the fact that the end of colonial forms of government does not necessitate the dismantling of colonizing structures of governance in post-colonial settings. The novel is also used as a literary text to denaturalize and deconstruct conventional narratives of power and make alternative subjectivities articulable. The main protagonist, Amrit, towards the end of the novel, learns to recognize different, unique individuals in Northeast India, who were earlier viewed as a homogeneous mass. Amrit starts to observe what the borderland subjects try to communicate to the outside world. The borderland, which was previously brushed aside as "incomplete" and "formless", starts to take a different narrative framework.

The novel's central plot follows Amrit Singh, a journalist from Kolkata,

who travels to the Northeast to investigate the story of Leela, a missing girl from Manipur whose photo appeared in a newspaper. Through his journey, the narrative explores the treatment of borderland communities and the ethical considerations in responding to such marginalisation. Writing on the troubled landscape of Northeast India and identification with its subjects, Amrit narrates:

... the settlement was plunged into *darkness*, the partially constructed flyovers looked like derelict jetties protruding towards a sea that had retreated some centuries ago. Nothing could have been more *forlorn*. It seemed to me that the region had been *forgotten* by the world, and in the *absence* of connections with what lay beyond, an entire society was trying to create itself from selected memories and *incomplete* knowledge.

The people were like that too: *provisional*, *uncertain*, their responses taking place within single, discrete moments, their personalities determined by the *whimsy* of immediate acts, so that no story taking place in that region was ever quite complete, no individual a rounded figure, and the outline of the region itself was traced by *blurred*, *fluid* boundaries that shifted back and forth with each fresh incident. (Deb, 2005, p. 8, italics added)

The relation between the landscape and its inhabitants as analogous to each other is highlighted by such adjectives as “darkness,” “forlorn,” “forgotten,” “absence,” “incomplete,” “provisional,” “uncertain,” “whimsy,” “blurred,” and “fluid.” The equation between the landscape of the Northeast region and its inhabitants denotes the colonial mentality. The description highlights the issue of misrepresentation of the region as well as the Centre’s proclivity to exoticize the indigenous people and their cultures like its colonial masters. This marginalization of the people and the place showed its influence in the representation of “mainstream literature” and stereotyping of the place as “uninhabitable.”

Research has shown how colonialism shifted from military and political domination to cultural control, as shown in the works of Cohn (1996) and Dirks (1992). Colonial encounters shaped both physical and cultural boundaries, using tools like mapping to assert dominance. Alongside mapping the land, colonial powers also categorized and labelled indigenous peoples—initially as savages and raiders, and later as tribes, villages, and chiefs—thereby influencing identity formation in tribal societies. In acknowledging the Northeast region as a colonial construct which has been carried forward by postcolonial India, Deb (2005) writes:

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 fledgling nation should have anticipated this barrier, but their knowledge was partial, their lack of imagination absolute. (p. 31, my italics)

The motive of this arbitrary mapping of borders, as McClintock argues, was due to the colonial imagination that these “blank spaces” were inhabited by cannibals and monsters (cited in Kikon, 2009, p. 82) and where slavery, headhunting, and nomadism could be allowed to exist (Kar, 2009, p. 52). The colonial notion of “fixed” boundaries (boundary-making) reflects different perspectives from the indigenous people (Pachau, 2014, p. 97). Rather than implying that there were no classification systems in place before the colonial authority arrived, the indigenous people have always been fluid and mobile within and across tribes. The forced “rooting” of a people to a fixed location became even more crucial as a result, and the conflict between the indigenous and the colonialists can be understood as a contestation between an identity based on movement and an identity based on territory and territoriality.

Drawing on this frontier mentality, Amrit, the narrator from mainland India, perceives the Northeast region as geographically remote and “frontier-like” before coming across the borderlands. The idea of the frontier as a place where “law did not apply” comes from John Locke’s notion that law exists only in “the domesticated space, the *ius gentium*” (Nelson, 2011, p. 165). The Northeast, as an undomesticated region, becomes a space of control and rigid policing of borderland space. The technologies of rule, such as checkpoints and border posts, become a means to demarcate an inside/outside dichotomy of the Indian nation-state. The borderland subjects are routinely subjected to an inhumane form of subjection, which has been internalized by the local inhabitants:

Most knew the routine already; the men climbed off the bus again, leaving their bags behind, their hands empty and faces blank. While the soldiers waited, they formed a loose line, not looking at me as I joined them, still holding my bag. Some of the soldiers carried out a search on

the bus itself, poking underneath the seats and pulling cases out from the overhead rack... (Deb, 2005, p. 169)

The novel illustrates how sovereign power normalises subjugation by threatening individuals' lives when power dynamics are challenged. A scene where a young man is forced to strip at a checkpoint highlights this abuse. Citizens are compelled to define their political identity as either allies or enemies of the state through their own subjection. The narrative also emphasises how this process is intertwined with the racialization of space. Amrit is granted liberty to exercise the right to question his humiliation at the checkpoint because of two characteristics that distinguish him racially from the borderland subject: his ethnicity (his "big, Northern face") and his language (Hindi, the language of mainland India). The narrator said that the soldier, perhaps feeling intimidated, let him go because of "my features and the Hindi I spoke" (Deb, p. 170). The passage highlights how national identity in India is often racialized, with both the Hindi-speaking north and Dravidian south sharing a similar physical profile, excluding the Northeast. Northeastern women are stereotyped as immoral due to their Western clothing, making them seem "un-Indian" to mainlanders. This prejudice partly explains the false, sensational portrayal of Leela as a porn actress by the insurgent group named MORLS (Movement Organized to Resuscitate the Liberation Struggle), which draws Amrit to the region in the novel.

Later in the novel, the Burmese dissident's account provides the counterpoint to the racialised body where the Indian soldiers "did not distinguish between his face and that of the Indian hill tribals" (Deb, 2005, pp. 235-236). Such encounters predicated on race-thinking reveal, as Ahmed argues, "the racialization of bodily as well as social space" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 111). The combination of racial thinking and the frontier mentality results in the perception of this region as exotic and distinct from the mainland. The advice given to Amrit by Captain Das, an Indian army officer, shows this way of thinking. In such a chaotic environment, he claims, thinking must be "fluid." Captain Das continues to tell him: "you must accept this, the absence of old rules and the ability to make new ones as you go along, the feeling almost of being free from gravity" (Deb, p. 182). The lack of established laws and the freedom to create new ones call to mind the *topos* of an unfettered "state of nature." Northeastern borderlands are frequently portrayed as a region of intense unrest where a Hobbesian war of all against all is purported to be ongoing unabatedly in the Indian sovereign myth.

Shifting Selves, Shifting Borders: Dialogical Recognition of Alternative Notions of Subjecthood

The Sentinel, the newspaper agency where Amrit works, is named aptly after its colonial predecessor, called the Imperial (Deb, 2005, p. 54). It is not coincidental that Amrit, donning the colonial attitude of "the white man's burden," sets upon himself to speak for the supposedly mute subaltern Leela. Yet, his assignment is not so concerned with his subject (Leela), but he takes it up as it comes with the possibility of "breaking free" from the monotonous pattern of his life (Deb, p. 5). It is with this intention that he wants to "make her story my story, perhaps my best story yet" (Deb, p. 6). Amrit reminisces on Herman's notion of life that

... the self is *not a fixed, immutable thing* but a core around which our hopes and acts fashion fresh layers of being every day. There are no laws that say that you cannot become much more than your environment asks of you, nothing that prevents you from seizing the circumstances and *shaping* a unique role for yourself in the flux. (Deb, 2005, pp. 39-40, italics added)

The stress on "shaping" is essential because many mainland subjects, including Amrit at the beginning of the story, saw the borderlands as formless, chaotic places like colonial frontiers. People like Sarkar and Herman look at the region as "untapped," and thereby are interested only because it offers "a potentially good market" as well as a chance to shape one's self "in the flux." Even more, the character of Malik, a supposed God-like sovereign agent, takes the form of a proto-colonial figure in the novel. His acute awareness of the power of creating out of an "empty space" gives him an aura of sovereign power. For him, the boundaries of the colonial empire and the post-colonial borderland are comparable realms of "limitless subjectivity." Like Kurtz, Malik builds a complex facade, ironically termed the Prosperity Project, which acts as a shiny "surface" to conceal other operations like producing fake currency. Malik's symbolic activities create a fictitious system of law in this "war-ridden" region. The mythic status that Malik is given by some characters in the text is likewise rooted in the *topos* of a chaotic region.

In contrast, Leela is a representative figure of the subaltern subject in the text. She is depicted as an abject, mute, immoral character who has been condemned by a sovereign force. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak (1988) is renowned for her claim that when the subaltern

speaks, we frequently lack the frameworks to identify such articulations as kinds of resistive speech. Leela is introduced to the readers only through a photograph devoid of her personhood. To get back to Amrit's original predicament, his early responses to Leela's picture reveal his failure to recognise the subaltern's voice or demand. Amrit stands as a representative of an "outsider" who attempts to "speak" for the subaltern subject. But initially, his intention was driven by curiosity and not concern. It is a venture that he undertakes to remake his sense of self. His vision of the peripheral alters as he travels across the borderlands, mirroring his changing interpretations of the image. At first glance, the image resembles an embalmed tomb housing a portrait of the living dead: Leela's dismal corporeal state. Yet, as Amrit travels into the borders, the picture gradually comes to life. He picks up on details in the picture that he had not seen or noticed before, such as the allegedly helpless woman's autonomy and the intricacies of the borderland environment.

Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), analyses a radical turn in colonial studies which saw a shift from the colony and colonized towards the colonizers' outlook. Pratt observes that the subject of such colonial-era narratives projects itself as an innocent, passive, and "non-interventionist .. . presence" (p. 78). Likewise, *Surface* follows these "anti-conquest" colonial narratives, which is seen in Amrit's travel from the mainland to the borderland in postcolonial India. However, instead of projecting itself as innocent, Deb deconstructs the narrative framework from within through Amrit's gradual transformation and recognition of the subaltern subject. Amrit's propensity to make assumptions based on pedagogical narratives is challenged when his subjective experiences do not match the identity markers familiar to him. We observe that Amrit's identity undergoes a subtle transformation as he moves from trying to use Leela's story for self-validation to genuinely understanding her suffering. His journey shifts from self-serving motives to a deeper emotional awareness, contrasting with the initial fantasies he projected onto her image.

The change in Amrit's perception of the photograph is significant as it involves a process of "recognition" of the subaltern's identity and resistant voice. The process of "recognition" is not a "monological" process, rather it is "dialogical" (Taylor, 1992). This process of recognition occurs in the text in two ways. The first deals directly with the narrative of the photograph itself, in which Amrit begins to see substantial differences.

In stark contrast to the earlier portrayal of Leela's face as without any expression, Amrit now notices an alertness and a lack of embarrassment in her eyes as though defying the camera's predatory gaze and the men behind the camera: "She appeared to be returning my gaze" (Deb, 2005, p. 84). Amrit initially convinces himself of his subjective prominence by passing a fleeting glance over Leela's picture. However, Amrit's long and deliberate consideration of the photograph, accentuating the wariness and potential lack of embarrassment shown by Leela's stare, can be read as her demand that her indignity be acknowledged. Secondly, Amrit's desire to assume and fabricate Leela's story for his own end is looked upon as an attempt at "ethical violence." But his decision to refrain from committing this violence has been understood as "ethical failure," which is a redeeming quality in Amrit's sense of self. Drawing from Butler's (2005) idea of "ethical failure" as a defence against specific ethical violence that results from any erroneous belief in the idea of a radically autonomous self, Amrit's acceptance of "such failure is to expose oneself to a field of relationalities and modes of obligation to the demands of unacknowledged others, even in cases where the particular self was not directly complicit with the abandonment and abjection of the other" (Baishya, 2019, p. 175).

Therefore, the reframing of the idea of selfhood is demonstrated through Amrit's "ethical failure" at refashioning his previously perceived image of self. However, it comes at the cost of his material accomplishment, since he fails to publish the narrative behind the event depicted in the photograph. Nonetheless, Amrit's progressive recognition of other(s) and the "wisdom" he gains from them remains the crux of the narrative. The transformation in Amrit's mind, one that is receptive to differences, is particularly described during a protest march immediately following his arrival back in Imphal from the Indo-Myanmar border. As a result of a "touch of grace, of wisdom" that "had been conferred upon me by Leela" (Deb, 2005, p. 253), Amrit begins to "see distinct, individual faces, some calm and resigned, others wracked by doubt; faces that were here not just to defend some boundary or other but to show the uncaring, unheeding world that they existed and could not be forgotten" (Deb, 2005, p. 253).

To conclude, Northeast India stands out as a distinct region both in terms of geography and culture. Home to numerous tribal groups with diverse languages and vibrant oral traditions, it has long been viewed

as the “exotic other” in the broader narrative of the Indian nationalist gaze. The separatist movements and conflicts in post-independence Northeast India have created a distinct political landscape. In this context, developing native historiographies in Northeast literature is crucial as it provides a counter-narrative to the homogenising effects of nationalist historiography, which often erases the identities of minority communities following decolonisation. Considering this, we are led to infer that the absence of a “self” that resembles the “self” produced by Indian mainlanders denotes not the absence of alternative notions of subjecthood, but rather its lack of recognition. In the postcolonial discourse, like the colonial discourse, the subaltern subject is excluded from claiming subject status based on race, caste, gender, etc. In *Surface*, Siddhartha Deb subverts the postcolonial discourse by privileging the non-subject’s or subaltern’s claiming of subject positions, which alters the discourse of subjecthood. The narrator’s self-sovereignty illusions gradually dissolve, and at the same time, other subjectivities and collectivities become more visible inside the literary space.

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