

## A Study into the Journey from Light to Darkness in Siddhartha Deb's *Surface*

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**Abstract:** Twentieth century is broadly known for the rise of the spirit and notion of nationalism, particularly in Asia and Africa. In the process of decolonization the imagination of 'nation' as an ontological and existential creation came into being. The nations enjoyed their phoenix rise from the debris of their imperial past for the new light of the day. Dispelling the darkness nations like India came up with new hopes and desires dismantling the imperial discourses. The crisis of national discourse is represented in Indian texts of the age. This crisis manifests itself in tensions over the choice of a national language, over resource allotment between villages and cities, over struggles between marginal and mainstream cultures that result in the growth of alienation of certain parts of the country. The novelists like Siddhartha Deb from North-East India write about these tensions in his fictional representations. His writings are close observations on India's contemporary situations. He focuses on the internal crises and sufferings of a person in relation to his society. His keen observation and writings of his native place include facts related to politics and social norms. Deb's *Surface* (2005) makes a major contribution highlighting the extremely complex situation of India's North-East region with the exploring of certain contentious issues. In the novel Deb tries to show how the North-East largely remains as an area of darkness by showing the protagonist's journey from 'the mainland to the region' quite similar to one's journey from light to darkness.

**Keywords:** Partition, Migration, Nation, Alienation, Identity.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Siddhartha Deb was born in Meghalaya and grew up in Shillong in the north-eastern of India. He was educated in India and at Columbia University. As a sports journalist he began his career in Calcutta and came to Delhi where he preferred to be a creative writer. His first novel, *The Point of Return* (2002), is semi-autobiographical in nature and set in a fictional hill-station that closely resembles Shillong in India's North-East.

North-East literature in India refers to the literatures of different languages of North-East India and the body of work by English language writers from this region. Ever since the days of Nehru, representation has been one of the most persistent issues confronting India's northeast. It remains a less significant region in many ways. The troubled political climate, the beautiful landscape and the convergence of various tribal groups perhaps have given rise to a body of writing that is completely different from the mainstream Indian English literature. North-East was a colonial construct and continues to be distinct by its virtue of having a historically difficult relationship with the Indian nation state. In the recent past national publications and journals had started taking interest in writings from this region. Several national newspapers and magazines have featured special issues on writers from North-East. The emergence of literature from North-East has also generated huge curiosity within and outside the nation. In this kind of socio-political climate and choice of life some eminent writers such as Mitra Phukan, Dhruva Hazarika, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Jahnvi Barua, Anjum Hasan, and Siddhartha Deb write a literature of different taste in English language from North-East. These writers express strong political awareness by addressing issues such as identity and ethnicity, violence and the growth of revolutionary groups in this region. Some of them attempt to draw the attention to approach and change the New Delhi colonial mindset regarding the North-East territory. Through their writings they try to create a climate where the tribals and the others develop a feeling of oneness as the whole nation belongs to them.

In his novels Deb portrays an area of unknown for the mainland where common men and women face the paradoxes of inhabiting a naturally beautiful area that has gradually, over the decades become a turbulent and destructive arena of sorting out disputes regarding ethnic identities. Deb in his novels presents a history of the northeast by recounting the state of affairs for the locals and the migrants. The author out of his own experience provides glimpses of the living in this borderland in a state of violence and fear before and after independence.

Deb's novels have a mirror reflection of the contemporary society. He explores the issues related to the life and society. His vision as a writer is not limited to the external conflicts and happenings, but also

focuses on the internal crises and sufferings which a person acquires through his surroundings. His keen observation and writings of native land include facts related to politics, social norms and economic destitute and its impact on the life of a common people. Along with the contemporary situations, Deb also brings out the historical facts related to politics and society and their impact on people.

Deb first novel *The Point of Return* (2002) is about the search for home. It revolves around the father-son relationship of willful, curious boy, Babu, and Doctor Dam, an enigmatic product of British colonial period. The novel looks at India where the ideals that brought freedom from colonial rule are beginning to crack under the pressure of new rebellions and conflicts. As the father grows old and the son tries to understand him, clashes between ethnic groups in their small town show them to be strangers to their country as well. *The Point of Return* poignantly explores the precarious balance of familial relationship built around secrets and the intrusions of political conflicts outside the control of individuals.

Deb's creative imagination gets revealed in his autobiographical mood of narration in the novels. But he writes what he sees and experiences. History, politics and geographical details of North-East region largely affect the lives of common people. Graphically he presents them in his fiction. Deb's penetration into the human psyche and his style of revealing social facts take the readers to his own world. Siddhartha Deb's second novel, *Surface* (2005) makes a major contribution to highlight the extremely complex situation of the region. In the novel Deb tries to show how the North-East largely a region of India remains as a Conradian 'area of darkness' by narrating the protagonist's journey from 'the mainland to the region', as one from lightness to darkness.

*Surface* (2005) narrates about Amrit a Delhi-educated young journalist who works for the Sentinel; a Calcutta based newspaper and is sent on an assignment to the region. Here he investigates a case that takes him and the reader on a journey which challenges many stereotypes and myths of the place and its people. Amrit's journey to and through the North-Eastern region is quite similar to Marlowe journey into the heart of Africa is Conrad's *An Area of Darkness*. The novel revolves around the character Amrit, a Sikh reporter and the whole situation and problems are shown through his character. As Amrit travels to the place for preparing his report, he comes across various issues and facts of which he was, being unaware of the facts which are concealed by the people in the depths of their consciousness. Amrit Singh has not come to the North-East with any emotional attachment. He comes, rather, to pursue an incident captured in a picture taken at a press-conference which may give him independence as a journalist. Experiences of Amrit as the subjective part of the novel give a beautiful setting, exhibiting threat to a young woman, at gunpoint by the masked local terrorists-cum-moral police for alleged participation in a pornographic movie. In the novel Amrit vividly describes the beauty of the region and its economy, against the backdrop of terrorism, insurgency and violence associated with it. Amrit captures the essence of this experience in the novel:

*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 complete neglect and brute force.... 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 ... a museum collection of tribal territories and princely states.... The politicians and administrators in Delhi who determined how the region would fare in the fledgling nation ... faced the alienation of the local population with contempt, a potent mixture that, like hot air meeting cold in the skies over the hills, produced thunderstorms of rebellion and repression. The Nagas rose first, then the Manipuris, then the Mizos, Assamese, Bodos and Hmars, and now... as many as a hundred and fifty groups... [moved] stealthily along arms routes from jungle camps located in Bangladesh and Burma (31).*

The problems of insurgency, ethnic clashes and high rate of illiteracy are shown by the novelist. An isolated event in a remote location is thus revealed to be no less than a microcosm of the global conflicts of our age. Deb tells us how Amrit after reaching near Manipur, gets to know about the insurgent group MORLS (Movement organized to resuscitate the liberation struggle), which casts itself as a guardian of morality and are at same time responsible for violent activities. They were the authoritative and controlling power of that place that kill the people who disobey their dictate. The terror of the group there obstructs the peace process peace in the society. Discontent brews, violence proliferates as a result of which no solution was visible. Just like MORLS there were other insurgent groups too, which were formed due to some reason or the other. Every group had its own cause for protest and dispute. These groups were not only authoritative but also regulate the life and actions of the people and the government. The novel delineates how the local government has to obey the instructions laid by the insurgent groups.

In search of the story of the woman in the photo, Amrit travels by road from Assam to Kohima, and then from there to Imphal and finally from Moreh to Myanmar across the international border and backs again. During his travel he explores the problems that the region faces. The government authority only waits as the onlookers. Natural disasters like flood and landslide add to the woes of a largely tribal population who lose everything. The youth of this region either turn into rebels, or smugglers and drug-addicts. In this bleak scenario, Amrit's investigation takes him towards an enigmatic character, the Director of Prosperity Project and

the employer of the girl in the photograph. This man, Malik, apparently works on rehabilitation of drug-addicts, AIDS patients, proper farming and various other schemes that attract a lot of foreign donations, which keep both the terrorists and the government officials happy. Since the whole project, is involved in the success story of improving lot of the North-Eastern people it turns out to be a hoax at the end. Malik apparently dies before Amrit reaches him, Peter Parker, in his review of the novel in *The Sunday Time* (May 15, 2005), has compared it with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Although we are in India rather than Africa, Malik is clearly meant to remind us of Conrad's Kurtz...."

Amrit, in the novel, is confused by the different accounts of and expectations from the region by the native population. He notes: "There were moments when I was charmed by the place... the careful dignity of the people, the women in... intricately embroidered skirts and the old men, such a startling combination of Mongoloid faces and devout Vaishnavite Hindus in their clean white dhotis" (188). He appreciates the "small canals clogged by patches of water hyacinths...[and] in the centre of the town... a fort with thick walls, an old burial ground for the warrior kings who had once ruled the valley" (188).

However, as an outsider to this region, he still fathoms the dominant mood, anger and frustration of the people. He says: "But when I looked more closely I saw something of the anger lurking below these apparently calm surfaces... [I]n... [the] modern part of town, on the road leading to the airport... houses had been left incomplete... while shabby stores... [had] cheap Chinese goods that... were more easily available than things from the Indian mainland" (188).

To his surprise, he discovers near the Myanmar border, at Moreh, how there was rampant buying and selling of smuggled goods. On the way to Moreh by bus, Amrit registers such a moment as darkly terrifying: "I had a glimpse of armed men in camouflage at a clearing in the forest, but it was impossible to tell if they were a government unit or an insurgent outfit" (221).

For a solution of the problems when peace-talks between the Indian government and insurgents and terrorists are initiated, there is mounting tension among the ethnic identities: "The worry in the valley was that the Naga insurgents would strike a deal with the Indian government, adding Naga-inhabited parts of Manipur to an autonomous Naga state much larger than present-day Nagaland".

*Surface* is a scathing criticism of the Delhi-based Indian government for its flawed strategies towards the North Eastern part of India. "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 complete neglect and brute force" (31).

This is one of the various reasons why this was an "area plunged in darkness" (35), a phrase that seems to allude to two significant literary texts: Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and V. S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*. Amrit's journey to and through the North-East region is quite similar to Marlow's journey into the heart of Africa. Through such a literary allusion, Deb is trying to show the neglect that this part of the Indian nation has been subjected to by the people in power at the centre for a very long time. The allusion of Naipaul's non-fictional book is even more significant since the setting and there is the whole of India, and not just any specific region. If a writer such as Naipaul mostly sees the Indian state from outside categorizes as an 'area of darkness', the writers in India who have mostly lived the experience of being in India do not conceive of India as a singularly bright or dark place. Here, Deb tries to show how the North-East has largely remained an area of darkness by showing Amrit's journey from 'the mainland' to 'the region' as one from light to darkness. However, in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, though India is again divided into two clear parts, one full of light and the other a dark one, the places that he identifies in those terms are different. Whereas cities such as Bangalore and Delhi are shown as areas full of light, the rural belt, especially, the Gangetic belt is shown as the place full of darkness, symbolizing poverty, ignorance and lack of development. If the contexts of the above mentioned three texts on India are understood in a comparative framework, it certainly reveals the difference in the ways the three writers, Naipaul, Adiga and Deb have looked at the nation-state, i.e. India.

*Surface* provides one with various examples of the differences between stereotypes and realities, when it comes to defining a place and its people. The novel wastes no time in juxtaposing stereotypes with realities, and an outsider's initial impression on 'the region' with that of a later period which comes with some understanding arising out of one's experience of the place and its people. For instance, when Amrit first sees the place from his aircraft, he describes his very first impressions as "a green and fecund valley" that soon "gave way to the camouflage of army uniforms and the dour faces of soldiers once I set foot in the city" (6). These two first impressions contrast the natural state of the place as one endowed with lush green natural beauty with the current sad state, where in the place is a prisoner to the custodians of the unity of a nation state – the army soldiers.

During Amrit's stay in the area for sometime, he realizes that the region cannot be branded as either a nature's paradise, nor as a place polluted by human desire to occupy and oppress, as is seen in the earlier two impressions of his regarding the place. He starts realizing the futility of any such fixity of identity of the region. He finds it a much more vibrant place, where in the identity is a constantly changing fluid one, and not a fixed

one. He says: "...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" (8).

The realization that a place can never be categorized by fixed identity markers is an outcome of getting to know a place through personal experience, and not through perceived notions and ideas received through secondary sources. This is something that comes out clearly when the 'mainstream media' first covers very little about North-East region of India, often citing the reason that it is "too far" (71), and even when it does so, it either focuses on the region as a tourist spot for the nature-lovers conveniently forgetting the other aspects of human life there, or it goes to the other extreme, by portraying the place as an abode for violent extremists. Usually when a reporter goes to the north east region, covering wild life is preferred as a much safer option than covering the political turmoil, let alone taking the risk of trying to understand the socio-political problems from the ground zero by talking to the people concerned.

This is why when Amrit first encounters an official in Manipur, from when wanted to know whether Amrit was "*interested in wildlife*", because most reporters from the 'mainland' do. In fact, a further evidence of this is seen when Amrit's boss in the *Sentinel* newspaper in Calcutta specifically tells him, "Be proactive, Singh. Look, I need colour pieces, things about local festivals, wildlife sanctuaries, and shopping, feature-like things. Do they have adventure tourism?" (42). It clearly underlines the desire of the mainstream media in the 'mainland' India to either exoticise the North East region, just as the Occident West does to the Orient Asians, or to make it a region to be afraid of similar to the fear of the Orient by the West, as is exemplified in literary texts such as *A Passage to India*, or theorized by postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said in *Orientalism* and Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask*. It is pertinent to point out here that just as the media in the mainland India considers the North-East region "too far" for adequate coverage, similarly the general attitude of the people in the North East about the people from the mainland is that they are the 'others', the 'outsiders' due to a vacuum created between the two.

The gap between the other and the outsider is emotional, social and political which according to Deb is needed to bridge the two at the level of stakeholders. This is why, as one character in the novel points out, Amrit, being an 'outsider' to the region should not get too close to the goings on in this place, and should instead act as a "detached observer", and should have "no involvement" in the murky affairs of the region (45). The outsider-insider dynamics in the nation-state gets more complicated when even the 'insiders' too have multiple, and sometimes contradictory perspectives about it. For instance, when one of the 'insiders' believes that there was freedom in this region because there were no rules here, because you could change and become anything you wanted to be, another one disagrees with the idea of the region being a free place without any rules. In the specific case of the North East Indian region, the notion of a 'nation-state' becomes ambivalent and complicated when it comes to the insurgents who fight for the nationhood of their regions, and then have to surrender before a larger entity, i.e. the Indian nation, against which they had been waging a war till then. The novel does not shy away from highlighting this internal contradiction.

While considering the cause of insurgency in the North-East, Deb imagines it as a nation being at war with itself, and when that happens it tends to overshadow the living, thriving cultural as well as other material aspects even though they continue to thrive beneath the surface despite all the inhuman atrocities committed by all the self-righteous warring groups. Moreover, each place, in its peculiar and unique people and geography can have an indelible, but often indescribable impression on one that can overcome any war or man-made destruction. Robiul, an important character in the novel strongly condemns this attempt to see a region as 'the other'. While talking about the 'problems' in the North East region, he wants the Indian government not to look at it very differently from similar other problems as that would only encourage the insurgents and separatists in seeing their act of fighting for a nation-hood as a genuine one, by lending their cause more legitimacy. Robiul acknowledges the differences in people and their cultures in different regions of the Indian nation, but he is against the targeting of one region and showing it as different and in a negative light. He tells Amrit: "You may be a stranger here, but you are no stranger to your country. And things aren't that different here from anywhere else, perhaps more extreme, yes, but not a different order of things" (47). This remark by Robiul contextualizes the central theme of the novel that of the 'nation' as an entity full of people who are basically similar in their very essence and that it does not help to look at one problem as completely isolated from all others. To underline the point that dividing people on the basis of regions, or other such manmade constructs is a flawed one and that human beings everywhere in the world are inherently similar in so many ways. More than anything else the novel, brings out the idea of a borderless world, and the fact that 'nation' is an artificial construct. What really matters is the belief in one's ideology regardless of one's nationality and the human connection.

As when Amrit begins his journey to 'the area of darkness' with some preconceived notions about 'the region', mostly received from the unreliable and largely biased accounts of the place and its people by the mainstream media from the mainland, during and certainly after the end of his journey, the realization sets in

that 'the region' cannot be bound by any fixed identity markers. It, like any other region, is in a state of constant flux. He also realizes that no forced identity can be thrust upon a large number of people, unique and special in themselves. "in what I had thought so far as a homogenous crowd, I began 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" (253).

Deb's *Surface* is an ideal articulation of the notion of nation through the journey of his protagonist. In many ways it is stereotypical in its tone and tenor of protest literature. The creative imagination and subjective aspects are prospectively protective but often misses the objective introspection into the self of the 'other'. It is an artificial construct arising out of political expediency and compulsion. And it should be treated like-wise, without ever allowing it to foreshadow the uniqueness of an individual regardless of one's nationality or region.

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