



Research article

Homes on the threshold: A reading of the representation of Shillong in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*

Lizbeth Shine, PhD

Independent Researcher, Annasseril House, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

Abstract

Shillong as a place has come to represent many aspects of what it means to belong to a postcolonial space. A hill station in colonial times, it was designed by the British to evoke the memories of a homeland far away. Today it is an area marked by remnants of the colonial past harbouring the coming together of identities that blur borders and belief systems. Shillong as a place has become an entity in transition burdened with myriad questions of who gets to call it home. The paper attempts a reading of Janice Pariat's short stories in the collection *Boats on Land* to see how Shillong is portrayed in it. The stories become significant in portraying a postcolonial space that becomes a dynamic zone constantly negotiating with ideas of belonging. Pariat's stories lead to an alternate understanding of the land and the people that try to address its manifold, variegated existence. The paper looks at how the stories challenge the Western world's homogenised understanding of South Asia, but also the need for revisiting our lands and their stories through lenses that have been deemed marginal for a long time.

Keywords: Shillong, postcolonial space, home, in-transition.



Shillong, with its dynamic history, once became the home away from home for the colonisers. The space was designed to keep alive the memory of home that lay across the oceans. Post-independence, the land is undergoing a period of transition in terms of changing ideas of belongingness and, at times, a scene of ethnic violence demanding the exodus of the so-called '*dkhars*' or outsiders. In *Boats on Land*, a collection of short stories by Janice Pariat, the characters, whose lives are in one way or the other closely linked to Shillong, question the exclusivist identity of belonging.

Contact: Lizbeth Shine, Independent Researcher, Annasseril House, Kottayam, Kerala, India, Email: lizbethshine@gmail.com

Article History: Received: 15 April 2026. Accepted: 18 August 2026. Published: 07 October 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the *author/s*. License, Pine Press, India. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Citation: Shine, Lizbeth. 2026. Homes on the threshold: A reading of the representation of Shillong in Janice Pariat's *Boats on Land*. *Journal of South Asian Exchanges* 3.1 < <https://saexchanges.com/v3n1/v3n121.pdf> >

Every story in the collection reflects the silences, sounds, and tender memories of the land through the lives of its characters. This paper tries to establish how *Boats on Land* re-examines the story of the land through characters whose stories run into each other's notions of homeland. According to Dutta (2014), in the Northeast of India, the concept of homeland becomes important as it guarantees tangible results to the long quest for one's home; this also becomes a key argument in the demand for a homeland by separatist groups.

Home is a multifaceted concept with emotional, social, cultural, and geopolitical components, but "homeland," through the addition of land, has a more bounded connotation. The geopolitical implications of homeland are far more concrete and corporeal than the emotional positionality of home. (Dutta, p.21)

Pariat's stories present instances of the inability to hold onto one's homeland due to the constant tussle over who the land belongs to. There are no winners in such a struggle, just people who live with the idea of home on the thresholds. These stories work as an alternative to the dominant discourses surrounding the land Pariat calls home. The stories challenge an exclusivist identity through the portrayal of multiple layers of existence experienced in the everyday lives of the characters. *Boats on Land* offers an important way of understanding what home means to people who survive in contested areas. The paper will look at different time periods in the stories and how home is defined at the thresholds in each of these time periods.

Liminality in the Context of Literature from Northeast India.

In literature, the concept of threshold has gained great significance to help look at an in-between existence of characters. In postcolonial writings, the liminal has often been portrayed as a positive impact of the contact between different cultures. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Edward Soja's third space are a few instances where liminality acts positively. But what happens when the liminal unfolds amidst ongoing struggles of who gets to call the land their home? A liminal position in the context of Northeast literature finds its existence in spaces where cultures meet and clash with each other. The idea of the liminal space as a "contact zone" (Pratt 1991) gains great significance in helping one understand the unfolding of asymmetrical power relations. In Pariat's stories, we see instances of stories unfolding in such "contact zones", leading to "attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 1969, p. 359). It is in such a liminal space that the stories of Pariat present their characters. At the threshold of the past and the present, myth and reality, the written word and the spoken traditions, these characters attempt to forge an idea of home. The threshold, or liminality, becomes crucial in the context of the Northeastern region of India. The region puts forward instances of liminality that emerge from unprecedented events shaping the day-to-day reality of the people. To elaborate on this, liminality as discussed by Bjorn Thomassen in "Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions" (2012) is referred to. Thomassen builds on Victor Turner's (1987)

concept of “social Drama” as something of an eruption from the surface of ongoing social life, to discuss the wider significance liminality offers. Turner’s fourfold division of social drama into “breach–crisis–redress–reintegration, introduced the crisis phase, or the liminal phase. This crisis phase becomes important in understanding another aspect of liminality, the liminality that is reabsorbed into social life when the crisis remains unresolved. Thomassen (2012) states that in the crisis or liminal phase, “sides are taken and power resources calculated. But this often leads to a schism into two camps or factions” (p. 689). Such schisms created in social life contribute to the nuanced understanding of literary works from Northeast India. Thomassen goes on to suggest that such schisms, or what Gregory Baston termed “schismogenesis” (Thomassen, 2012), are:

... particularly prone to unfold in liminal moments, and that it can, under given circumstances, establish itself as a lasting form. This, it seems, can happen in two different ways: The first is when the ritual sequence is not properly “closed,” for example, when the third and fourth stages of redress and re-aggregation fail, propelling the crisis further into more crisis (Turner says crisis is contagious). The second way is when the schism is officially incorporated into the re-integration ritual phase: recognized and made public, “stated” and staged, “normalized” into the new “structure,” rather than overcome (p. 689)

In Northeast India, years of insurgency and counter-insurgency movements have initiated this “schismogenesis”; the crisis is not resolved, and it is reintegrated into the social life of the people. Pariat’s stories give instances of such an existence of people living in the aftermath of, and in some cases the ongoing, conflicts in the land. These stories present scenarios where the crisis of the land has produced extraordinary situations that become part of people’s reality. The struggle to cope with this new reality and define what it means to call a land home is constantly dealt with in the stories. The liminal situations caused by unprecedented events lead to responses quite unlike the ones known to history. Pariat’s stories take us through the idea of belonging formed when the schisms created in the struggle between different claims on the land are integrated into society without resolving the crisis.

The Threshold Homes in Pariat’s *Boats on Land*.

Home in many works from Northeast India has an emotional positionality (Dutta, 2014, p.21). The fight for a homeland has not always resulted in a positive outcome for the people of the land. Today, people make sense of their new reality through ideas of home that are created as a result of being in a threshold position. Pariat’s stories bring together the past and the present to forge new ideas of what it means to belong. The beliefs and oral traditions of the past become the anchors helping people survive the unforeseen troubles of the present. In ‘Dream of the Golden Mahseer’, the understanding of life and death is beyond the rational explanations of things. The disappearance of Mama Kyn (the narrator’s uncle), due to the diabetic hallucinations he suffered from, seemed ridiculous to the then young narrator. Mama Kyn was a man who survived the African Front during the Second World War, not someone who could

not just be defeated by some hallucinations. Life for the narrator and his family was a "curious patchwork," a coming together of many people, beliefs, and practices, and it "lapped on peacefully" (Pariat, 2012, pp. 63-65). The sudden departure of the uncle, who had managed to survive wars, troubled his nephew, the narrator. Later in life, the nephew comes to peace with the disappearance of his uncle by understanding that "...no one is truly ever gone. All voices are heard in a river's murmuring" (Pariat, 2012, p.78). He comes to believe that his uncle, who loved the rivers, continues to live in the murmurs of the rivers.

Sanjoy Hazarika, while quoting Patricia Mukhim in *Strangers No More*, notes how some of the non-tribals had been in the land for three generations. She clearly states how life on a daily basis will not be as feasible if all the so-called outsiders were forced to leave the land. "I would think mutual respect and a shared objective is likely to achieve more for Meghalaya ...our narratives which are built around fear need to be unbundled" (p. 259). In '19/87', the story is set in the riots of 1987, where the political groups of the Khasi tribe in Shillong want all outsiders to leave the town. Suleiman is considered a dkhar, an outsider, in the land he has spent almost all of his life. He has lived here longer than many of the people calling him a Dkhar. Suleiman's story presents the outcome of a kind of political revolution¹ that aimed at the ousting of every person not belonging to the Khasi ethnicity. The crisis discussed by Victor Turner remains unsettled here. People like Suleiman try to reintegrate into a society where the schism is much wider and hostility too close to ignore. For Suleiman, Shillong is his only home. For him, there is no other place to call home, and he finds it the most beautiful place on earth. As he struggles to stay alive, in the only land he has ever called home, he realises surviving another day is what the future is built on.

For the twelve-year-old narrator in "Laitlum", it is in the experience of an alternative silence in the hills that her understanding of freedom changes. In "Laitlum", set around the same time as "19/87", we see the riots through the eyes of a group of teenagers who belong to a different class when compared to Suleiman. By placing the stories one after the other, Pariat also seems to be showing how the twelve-year-old girl and Suleiman face two different worlds though living in the same town. The parents in 'Laitlum', set in the 1990s, find it difficult to cope with the changes postcolonial Shillong is going through. The ways of the youth and their rebellions were not things they could associate with. "They live in the memory of colonial land, 'the peaceful little place...with its quaint British ways and pretty bungalows'" (Pariat, 2012, p.129). Nostalgia for the colonial past, a phenomenon discussed by Karlsson in 'Shillong: tribal urbanity in the Northeast Indian borderland', holds significance in the given context. Karlsson states that this Nostalgia has less to do with the past and more to do with the criticism of the present. Here, the parents are living through a time that experiences violence in the streets and the rebellion of the children inside their homes, so they'd rather go back to the past where life was comparatively peaceful.

Dariti in 'The Keeper of the Souls', a woman who lives at the edge of the city leading to the forests of Shillong, asks the narrator if he knew that 'people's souls turn into trees?' (Pariat, 2012, p. 264). She fights off workers and the local authority to preserve

the lives of the trees and the souls in the trees. In the story, the narrator and his wife have recently moved back to Shillong hoping to reconnect with their roots. They name their new house 'kynjai', after the old Khasi name for the colony they lived in, trying to find connections to their past in the new Shillong they are still trying to make sense of. Amidst all the changes in his land, the only thing that the narrator can connect to is Dariti and her beliefs. Deep down, he too is concerned by the changes around. As he looks outside at night, he realises that there are barely any "...dark patches and empty, uninhabited spaces. The town has hardly any room to breathe.... I can hear its vast, gentle heart race like a frightened animal. Suddenly I want to cradle it in my hand". Yet all hope is not lost; the breeze rushing through the pine trees outside will "keep away the ghosts" and "summon the spirits" to protect the land (Pariat, 2012, p.267). The transition of the land also reflects a transitioning relationship of the people to the land. Pariat shows how the transitions have also enabled the experiencing of very different ideas related to Shillong, all existing simultaneously. There is this Shillong that will soon be modernised through the various projects of the government; on the other hand, the narrator and his wife search for a Shillong that might help them reconnect to a long-lost idea of home; and lastly, there is also a Shillong guarded by people like Dariti, who can feel the soul of the land. Pariat leads the reader to such a Shillong that is many things at the same time, where the land seems to be engulfed by the changes, unable to breathe, yet guarded by people who are willing to protect its sacredness by giving up their own lives. The idea of home transforms in such contexts and helps people reconnect to land by holding on to the beliefs and customs of the land that consider home to be not just limited to the four walls of a house.

Pariat shows us how the spoken word and the oral tradition of her land show existences beyond the concrete definitions of states, borders, and language. The stories of the land that are unwritten and untraceable play an important role in making this possible. The building of Shillong, a hill station that would be the paradoxical site for refuge and surveillance for the British (Kennedy, 1996, p.1), was in itself a breaking away from the existing order to create a world that would soothe the qualms of the colonizers. So, the need to question the existing borders and demarcations becomes even more important here as the history of the people goes beyond the creation of what is now Shillong. The changes that would usually take centuries to unfold were in this case witnessed by the people in a lifetime. One of the reasons why the spoken word becomes important is because of the tales it carries forward, true to their experiences at a time when the written word is corrupted by the influences around, be it the coloniser or the neo-coloniser holding power over it. The spoken word is hence sacred. In 'The Waterfall of Horses', the word, or *ka-ktien*, we are told, is not to be written down. When the Englishmen discuss places the young servant boy, who is also the narrator in the story, hasn't ever heard of, it slips through his "memory like little silver *doh thll*", a small fish (Pariat, 2012, p.4). The consciousness of the boy is so deeply connected to the land that he associates his experiences with the nature around him. The people have married their words to their songs and mantras, to be repeated until they wither away. Pariat defines the land by a historical and spatial remapping through

the stories. Through her stories that map across the town of Shillong and the nearby places that have been a part of Pariat's childhood, she engages in a negotiation of familiar places through unfamiliar stories. "A Waterfall of Horses" takes place in the 1850s; the village called Pomreng is considered no more than a smudge on the map and is at a day's distance from Shillong. The whole story becomes symbolic of how a place becomes a smudge on the map and is reclaimed by the forest. "Pomreng was a smudge that probably couldn't be found on any map of the area at that time.... Shillong, then called Laban, lay at the end of a rough, day-long, horse-cart" (Pariat, 2012, p.4). At the end of the story, the place called Pomreng has transformed to become unrecognisable. There are very few traces of its past left behind. What remains of the place are a few stones and "the waterfall, throwing up a sound, a word that is ungraspable and constant" (Pariat, 2012, p.19), echoing the unwritten stories of the land that fulfilled their duty and vanished. Pomreng is redefined as the place that fought the bilati men (white men) to reclaim the land through the power of words and mantras. Pariat brings out the significance of a place that is often considered a failed mission of the Welsh missionary Thomas Jones. It is now remembered as a victory of the Khasi people. Pomreng becomes a landmark in the new map of the land and the word withers away after performing its role of serving the people who created it. It is a home that is untraceable, indestructible, and available to the people to guide them in times of crisis.

In the story 'At Kut Madan', which translates to 'the end of the land', Doctor Wallang isn't sure where the line between a doctor and a shaman lies. "Sometimes, there didn't seem to be a difference" (Pariat, 2012, p.29). When the times demand, he crosses the lines that distinguish between the two. The doctor was never sure whether it was required of him to be a shaman or a doctor. "Sometimes, there didn't seem to be a difference" (Pariat, 2012, p.29). Sometimes he would be looking at an old woman's arthritis, and at other times he'd be travelling far to perform an exorcism, where "a woman had lost her child, but the dead baby, the villagers said, refused to leave her" (Pariat, 2012, p.39). The doctor sprinkles some holy water, chants a mantra, and, when left alone with the woman, also gives her medicines to help her sleep. The Smithson bungalow at Kut Madan, where Miss Lucy resides with her aunt and family, is described as surrounded by thick pine forests, and the place was called "Kut Madan" because "to the back, the trees spilled over a sudden sharp cliff that gave the place its name- 'the end of land'" (Pariat, 2012, p.26). The doctor is summoned to see what her illness is, as she has fainting spells, and there is a worry that she is possessed by a ghost or what the people call "kem ksuid". When Miss Lucy is not allowed to go horse riding, the only thing that makes her feel free, she requests the doctor to bring the sun, the wind, and the rain to her. It is at Kut Madan, a place situated at the literal end of the land, that Miss Lucy dreams of a dazzling fire bird. "A dazzling fire bird comes crashing down to earth, like a star that's burst into a million flames" (Pariat, 2012, p.32). Months later, an airplane crashes behind the bungalow, and the metallic fragments scattered across the rocks look like shiny rain. The doctor is reminded of Ms Lucy's dreams. It seems like the girl whose image against "Sohra's expansive sky and desolate hills" (Pariat, 2012,

p.31), seemed a strange sight to the doctor had become a part of Sohra and the sun, the wind and the rain had revealed its courses to her.

In "Sky Graves", Kasa comes to Bah Hem from Jaintia village in Assam. He comes at a time when the central government had sent the army to their state to quell the separatist movements in the state. But his village was removed from the more troubled parts of the state, such as Lakhimpur and Sibsagar that were the strongholds of the United Liberation Front of Assam, which claimed to fight for the liberation of the people. "I don't know which is worse...The ULFA or the army who trouble us and call us militant dogs" (Pariat, 2012, p.154). Kasa comes to Bah Hem to get a rifle repaired, but soon returns to ask for help with the shooting down of a tiger in their village. Bah Hem agrees and travels to their village, and manages to shoot down the tiger. The people at Kasa's house seem stoic even after the tiger is no longer a threat. The grandfather then explains to Bah Hem, in a low, toneless voice, an incident that happened a few days ago. Maina, Kasa's sister, was walking back from Malangpa market when a group of soldiers started harassing her in the forest. It had happened before, but this time there were too many of them. Suddenly, a tiger jumps out of nowhere, and it gives her enough time to run away. She hears shots but doesn't turn back to look. That evening her father falls ill. These beings, the grandfather explains, were all over the region "in Sohra and Jirang ...what people call shape-shifters, men whose souls can inhabit animals..." (Pariat, 2012, p.162). Bah Hem tells him that if that is true, then he just killed the old man's son. "No, you didn't. His spirit was wounded. You only set it free." Bah Hem wanted to laugh to swallow his grief. He asks the old man how men could change shapes: "utter some mantra? ... drink some magic potion that gives them fur and tail?" (Pariat, 2012, pp.162-163). The old man tells him that it can only be done out of love. The transformation myth is said to be a part of the Meghalaya's folklore since the beginning of time (Sangma, 2016, p.278). In the context of Shillong, it becomes a story that defines Shillong by blurring the boundaries between myth and reality. As the grandfather leaves the room, Bah Hem is still seated there, watching the fire "glow resolutely, a dull core of heat undying at the centre, the wood releasing all its tender memories of the earth" (Pariat, 2012, p.163). In the Khasi/Jaintia tradition "the tigerman/tigerwoman is a liminal human-animal being moving across alternate realities that are typical to the community it belongs to" (Lyngdoh, 2016, p. 650). The story becomes another instance of the divide between nature and culture being blurred, and it plays an important role in helping people survive. Kasa's father transforms to protect his daughter, which in the present reality of guns and violence would be otherwise impossible for him. The land for Pariat is incomplete without its beliefs, and she maps it through the importance of folk knowledge that guides people through their day-to-day lives.

An instance of the river playing an important role in helping the narrator see life differently is shown in the story titled "Boats on Land". The story begins with the narrator showing little interest in visiting her father's friend and staying with them for the holidays. For the narrator, the stay at her father's friend's bungalow brings up very new experiences. The story, with its poetic quality, seems to link the mysterious girl the

narrator befriends with the river. The girl, though only nineteen, is like the river, "filled with an old sadness" (Pariat, 2012, p.196). The narrator sees reflections of the river in her friend throughout the story. Once the narrator asked the girl what she wanted to do after college, the girl said that she wanted to follow rivers. At first, it did not make sense to the narrator. Soon she realises the deep connection her friend holds with the river. Every day the narrator gets to experience a very different life, walking around with her new friend. An important landmark they visit is Pukhuri, a large pond with rows of birches. The girl pulls the narrator along, saying that they should go for a swim. The narrator screams and yanks herself away, telling the girl that she doesn't know how to swim. That night the girl offers a wordless apology. She goes to the narrator's bathtub and pleads with the narrator to join her. Soon the narrator also notices that the girl looked nothing like the woman she thought was her mother. "I noticed the delicate slope of your shoulders, the plane of your back like a smooth river stone...drops of water glistened on your cheeks, hollow like emptied lakes" (Pariat, 2012, p.196). From that day on, every gesture of the girl left a significant mark on the narrator, as if it added something significant to their life. The girls would then spend their days around the rivers, exploring the areas. For the narrator, this was a new feeling, different from her experience of seeing and experiencing places as though on a screen while travelling in a car. Back in Shillong, the narrator cherishes her memory of the days spent in Assam; she realises that for her new friend, it is in the blurring of boundaries between herself and nature that the meaning of life exists. "When I think of you now, it's the feel of wet sand and long grass that comes to me, the smell of cigarettes, and cloves and creatures that live close to water. The stench of your old sadness" (Pariat, 2012, p.199). The narrator finds her home in this unlikely coming together of a person and their embodiment of the sentiments of the land. At times, Pariat's stories are searching for tangible landmarks that are spatial, personal, or historical. These landmarks are synonymous with what people would consider a feeling of being at home. The search is through memories, stories, and oral and physical aspects of the land. In 'A Waterfall of Horses', the village of Pomreng, its "Nong knia" (the bearer of the word) and the other people leave the land, "there are barely any recognizable markers of its past...The one thing that remains is the waterfall, throwing up a sound, a word that is ungraspable and constant (Pariat, 2012). The narrator's life and the memories of the village remain with the waterfall, ungraspable and constant. In the piece 'Secret Corridors', a convent school holds traces of the past that mingle with the present of the students, shaping them into the people they are becoming. Natalie, a student after a bitter experience with people she considered her friends, roams around the campus. She didn't notice for some time that she had entered an abandoned bathroom near the library. She hears very low sobbing from one of the doors; upon opening it, she finds Carmel weeping with her head held between her hands. Natalie gives her a handkerchief, and as Carmel dabs her face, she asks her what place this was. Carmel tells her that it was the old dormitory. "They used it as a military hospital during the Second World War" (93). Natalie would have explored the place on any other day, but that day she just felt like leaving the place that reminded her of

death and pain. But Carmel goes on to tell her that her grandparents met there. Her grandmother was a nurse and her grandfather a Major General. Natalie can sense the pride in her voice as she says this. Carmel returns the handkerchief and tells her that she's kind, unlike the other girls. Carmel leans closer and kisses Natalie on the lips. Natalie feels a transformation within and around herself. "Something inside her unravelled; it uncoiled to the floor and filled the room, every inch of its dusty corners. For a moment, the ghosts around them, and within, fell silent" (p. 94). The restlessness prominent at the beginning of the story is now replaced by the unravelling of her feelings. The act becomes a liberating one for both Natalie and Carmel. It becomes a space where they are not side-lined by "the invisible lines of demarcation" of the world around them. The act also becomes symbolic of the old structures of Shillong being redefined by new spaces of liberating experiences.

In "Embassy", Tei has just realised that his girlfriend doesn't love him anymore; heartbroken, he reaches a hotel called Embassy for a drink. The hotel had stood there since the 1960s and was passed on from one dkhar(outsider) to another. At present, it was a safer time for outsiders to have business in Shillong, though not completely safe. Embassy was a place removed from the outside for everyone who came here. It was their shared space to lament. "Here, people drenched their grief in alcohol, and stashed their dreams behind the familiar, flimsy darkness" (Pariat, 2012, p.207). As Tei goes in, Bisesh the Nepali boy nods at him. Tei debates whether to go or wait when he sees the place packed. Someone calls his name, and on getting closer he realises it was Mama Lang. Mama Lang had taught him how to fly kites. Yet his face was not an unfamiliar face in the town. It was a face marked with a weariness that was common on all the faces landlocked "by more than the towering mountains" (Pariat, 2012, p. 208). Mama Lang is no more the person he used to be. The constant struggles and the ultimate failure of the grand plans he and other members of KSU had led him to his present condition. Hotel Embassy becomes one of those few places where people like Mama Lang want to belong.

In the stories of Pariat, another important aspect focused on is to give space for the voice of the land; here, the land speaks, and the people speak of the land. The spoken word gives them the freedom long lost in the battles over the land.

Once printed, the word is feeble and carries little power. It wrestles with ink and typography and margins, struggling to be what it was originally, Spoken. Unwritten, unrecorded. Old, as they, as the first fire. Free to roam the mountains, circle the heath, and fall as rain. (Pariat, 2012, p.3)

Pariat's stories are set in the familiar streets and markets of Shillong. With each passing story, the places become a familiar name for the reader. Different parts of the town are introduced through the different stories. Pariat traces a map of her land through the stories. In 'Waterfalls of Horses', the first story of the collection, Pariat presents a picture of Shillong in the 1850s. "Pomreng was a smudge that probably couldn't be found on any map of the area at the time.... Shillong, then called Laban, lay at the end of a rough, day-long, horse-cart journey on a dirt track twisting through forested hills or miles of desolate countryside" (Pariat, 2012, p.4). Parallel to the story of the people

runs the story of Shillong. 'Echo Words' is set in the post-colonial times. The town is described as a sleepy one, where apart from the pernicious local drama nothing much of excitement ever happened. "...the British had been gone for five years, but Shillong still slumped in post-colonial depression" (Pariat, 2012, p.47). The very fact that Shillong, like the other hill stations in the country, was designed as an exclusively European enclave (Kennedy, 1996, p.1) feels at times like a trap to the people who live there now.

'Dream of the Golden Masheer' is a look back into the childhood of the narrator in the 1960s. A typical house in Shillong is described here,

We lived in a large, rambling house in the far west of the town, near Iew Duh-the local market that spread like an ancient labyrinth beyond the Mot Phram war monument. The wooden shutters were barely closed; neighbours were free to walk in and out, and it was also a place that offered shelter to stray cats and dogs during the rains. (Pariat, 2012, p.63)

The family, consisting of relatives and helpers, was like a community in itself. In 'Laitlum', we are taken to an important area in Shillong, Laitumkhrah, where Grace, Chris, Melvin and the narrator try to make sense of the present, unlike the parents who mourn for the better past. When the four teenagers decide to go to Laitlum, the narrator feels alive for the first time. The air of Laitlum, for her, does not hold any remorse; to her, it felt light. Grace, the narrator's sister, explains that Laitlum means, "where the hills are set free". Laitlum is the escape from the land that is trapped between the mountains. "The rising mist changed shape through the trees. It looked like faces, the ones you pass every day on the streets that turn their eyes away because everyone is a stranger in a town of careless bullets" (Pariat, 2012, p.138-139). It is also a town which has painful memories; Pariat's description allows us to see the problem with her land too. We realise that sometimes neighbours and friends are strangers too, because any day the careless bullet could pierce anyone, and anytime anyone could be the new outsider.

The narrator in 'Pilgrimage' arrives in Shillong; there is a description of how the land unfolds itself. "Shillong sprawled before her in all its unplanned ugliness...she knew the place intimately like one knows an old lover, its familiarity lay in its imperfections" (Pariat, 2012, p.168). Coming back to her land after years makes her feel secure, the unplanned ugliness of the land is intimate to her like an old lover. Many of the characters share a similar relationship with this land: they realise its shortcomings, but it is the only place they'd call home. Listening to the radio, she found it "oddly comforting, this sudden downsizing of the world" (Pariat, 2012, p.174). The people and places announced by the newscaster were all familiar ones, nothing too far, and everything within one's reach.

With each new chapter of the book, the places also become familiar. In 'Boats on Land' we see Shillong through the eyes of a teenager. Police Bazaar, Ward's Lake, Udipi Hotel, Floury's and Peking Restaurant were the places where their worlds unfurled. The other side of Shillong is the one seen through the memories of the narrator's father and his Assamese friend who left Shillong during the trouble in the 80s that demanded the

exodus of the outsiders. For them, the troubles changed everything and took away everything they cherished.

In 'Echo Words', "words hung in the air like a coil of thick, dark smoke" (Pariat, 2012, p.55). The characters are in in-between lands; they identify with the past of their land and at times question it. In 'Dreams of the Golden Masheer', when the narrator's uncle Mama Kyn disappears for the last time, accusations fly around like poisoned arrows about who removed the broom in front of his room. The broom was supposed to protect him from the 'puris' that lure men away. The narrator wonders how nobody saw that "the broom probably didn't keep anything away" (Pariat, 2012, p.78). Yet years later, when explaining the disappearance of Mama Kyn to his ten-year-old nephew, he says that Mama Kyn was taken away by the spirits, and the nephew plainly replies that such things are only believed by old people. Suggesting how the new generation might not always identify with the beliefs of the older generation.

In the midst of all the journeys, and the movement that the characters undertake, there are certain points, that could be places, people, or stories, that become a meeting point of all their experiences, a point that then gives them a sense of being. "Pilgrimage" brings up the different journeys in the life of the characters who lived in Shillong. It is the story of two pilgrimages that two people undertake, to two different ideas of home. The journey here is the third space where the encounters between different ideas of home take place. Barisha's partner is an Ashkenazi Jew, whose ancestors had fled Germany and made their way to Calcutta, from where a group of them came to the hills of Assam and who'd "long forsaken their quest for a distant promised homeland" (Pariat, 2012, p.167). For Barisha's partner, it was different; he wanted to go in search of his roots; it was one of those things that he had to do. As he prepares to leave, Barisha slips a "small plastic container of red-husked uncooked grain" (Pariat, 2012, p.167) into his bag. Every time she left Shillong, her mother put it in her bag, saying that it was to bring her home safely. "It was what the Khasis believed, that rice, commonplace and ordinary, carried the power of the earth where it was grown, and it would lead you back to where you belonged" (Pariat, 2012, p.167). For Barisha, when life becomes too silent in her South Delhi flat, she decides to journey back home. Her neighbourhood was full of people like them who had come from Northeastern states like Meghalaya and Nagaland. They were perpetual pilgrims, always journeying elsewhere. Barisha arrives in Shillong in mid-October. The town is described as sprawling before her in its unplanned ugliness. She knew the place intimately, like one knew old lovers; its familiarity was in its imperfections.

Conclusion

There is a moving away from the concrete definitions of states, borders and language in Pariat's stories. The stories question the demarcations that qualify some as insiders and the others as outsiders. In the case of Shillong, the history of the people goes beyond the creation of what is now Shillong. The stories stand witness to the relevance of the unspoken aspects of the land. Historically, the creation of Shillong as a hill station brought people from different parts of the country to work on the land, and

they are now among the people who call this land home. These changes that would usually take centuries to unfold were in this case witnessed by the people in a lifetime. The constant contestations over who has the right to call the land home have led to troubles that persist to this day. Pariat's stories take place in the midst of all this. These stories provide instances of finding home when the characters look for silences and roots in a land characterised by restlessness and change. In the stories of *Boats on Land*, home comes in different forms, often at the threshold, often momentarily through the spoken word, and at times through the land that speaks to its people.

Notes

¹ Bjorn Thomassen defines political revolution as follows: 'It is an effort to transform not just the political institutions but also the justifications for political authority in society, thus reformulating the ideas/values that underpin political legitimacy', p.683.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest: The author declares no potential conflicts of interest or disclosures with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding Disclosure: The author has received no funding either for the research work or for the publication of this research article.

Reference

- Dutta, U. (2014). The Long Way Home: The Vicissitudes of Belonging and Otherness in Northeast India. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 21. 10.1177/1077800414542703.
- Damico, M.M. 2024. Finding Liminality in Literature: The Decentered Voice and Its Power to Rewrite Cultural Narratives. *Master's Theses*. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/1120>
- Guenauer, C.2018. Diversity and Difference: The art of electioneering in Meghalaya. *Geographies of Difference. Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies*, Routledge. 196-214.
- Hazarika, S.2018. A Lost Kingdom, A Plateau and the Plains: Water, Words, Will. *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast*. Aleph.
- Karlsson, B. 2020. Shillong: Tribal Urbanity in the Northeast Indian Borderland. www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/shillong-tribal-urbanity-northeast-indian-borderland..
- Kennedy, D. 1996. The Hill Stations of British India. *The Magic Mountains: The Hill Stations and the British Raj*. University of California Press. ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft396nb1sf/
- Lyngdoh, M. "Tiger Transformation among the Khasis of Northeastern India: Belief Worlds and Shifting Realities." *Anthropos*, vol. 111, no. 2, 2016, pp. 649–58. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44791292>.
- Pariat, J. 2012. *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories*. Penguin India.
- Pratt, M. L. 1991. Arts of the Contact Zone, *Profession*, 33–40.
- Sagma, S. K. 2016. Shape-shifting or Transformation Myth in Garo Culture. *The Criterion*.181 <https://www.myresearchjournals.com/index.php/Dialogue/article/download/7939/2855/>.
- Thomassen B. 2012. Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions. *Society and Globalization, Roskilde University*.
- Tribal Cosmology, 2023. The Cosmic Tales of North-East India: Tribal Creation Myths Unveiled. <https://philosophy.institute/tribal-philosophy/tribal-creation-myths-northeast-india/>.
- Turner, V.1969. *Liminality and Communitas*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing. <https://voidnetwork.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Liminality-and-Communitas-by-Victor-Turner.pdf>

Lizbeth Shine is currently an independent researcher. She obtained her PhD in English from Mangalore University in April 2024. Her area of interest is Indian Literature in English with a focus on Literature from Northeast India. She was a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant at the University of Michigan, USA, in the academic year 2021-2022. Her teaching background includes four years as a Guest Faculty at UFGC Mangalagangothri, Mangalore University, and one year as a Teaching Faculty at Vallath Education, Trivandrum.
