

A peer-reviewed open-access journal indexed in NepJol

ISSN 2990-7640 (online); ISSN 2542-2596 (print)

Published by Molung Foundation, Kathmandu, Nepal


Article History: Received on February 25, 2024; Accepted on Nov 29, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/mef.v15i01.73939>

### **Manifestation of Hybrid Subjectivity: Fate of Diaspora in the Assamese**

**Novel *Damphu***

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Abstract**

This article concentrates on the hybrid subjectivity of the protagonist Jung, a Nepali diaspora in the novel *Damphu: The Rhythms of Life* living at Assam in India. It scrutinizes how Jung, as a diaspora, embodies cultural affiliations on both sides namely Nepal and Assam. He stays in one place and maintains close and imaginary relations with another. The novel written by Rumi Laskar Bora originally in Assamese language and later translated in English by Sarita Sharma is under scrutiny in this article. Theoretical insights of hybridity are borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin, Michele Reis, Edward Said, Evan Mwangi, Brian Stross and G. Sheffer. During the Second World War or earlier to it or even today, many people of Nepalese origin migrated or have migrated to the land of India for job opportunity or settlement or the both. However, they embody double consciousness, an outcome of hybridity swinging back and forth between Nepal and Assam. The hybrid subjectivity seems to accept the coexistence of opposites.

*Keywords:* hybrid subjectivity, double consciousness, diaspora, borderline, globalization

### Introduction

The objective of this research article is to examine hybrid cultural orientation as one of the characteristics of diaspora in the novel *Damphu: The Rhythms of Life* written by Romi Laskar Bora, an Assamese novelist in Assamese language and later translated in English by Sarita Sharma. The novel projects the story of a Nepali diaspora named Nar Bahadur, afterwards renamed Jung Bahadur living in Assam and his sweetheart Radha Tamang back in Nepal. The preliminary part of the novel sheds light on the exhilarating love story between Radha and Nar (Jung) belonging to Tamang community in Daman, Nepal. In the middle part, as a family legacy Nar (Jung) joins the British *Gurkha* army. Further, the novel reflects the effects of the Second World War. The third or the last part of the novel highlights the cultural twoness of the protagonist, between the homeland of the past and the host land of the present. Jung's bifurcated psyche also swings between two cultures, two nations, two lands and two women.

This article tends to expose hybrid standpoint of the protagonist since earlier researches upon the novel are not guided through theoretical perspective. From the critical lens of diasporic theory, the novel is semantically rich. The prime concern of the study here is to demonstrate an intersection of the geographical here and geographical there inspired by double consciousness.

While analysing the novel, this research seeks answers of three pertinent questions from the perspective of hybridity. Firstly, what hybridity means in theoretical discussion, secondly, why hybrid characteristic grows when people cross the national border and live in the capacity of transnational citizens. Thirdly, how *Damphu*, the selected novel for analysis, reflects the hybrid subjectivity of the protagonist Jung alias Nar.

Meanwhile, it is contextual to define certain theoretical terms such as hybridity, double consciousness and diaspora used in the article. The term 'diaspora' employs archetypal as well as modern day liberal meaning somehow

different from each other. In the archetypal sense, classical diaspora" get associated with antiquity, ancient Greece and Jewish exilic experience" (Reis, 2004, p. 53). Their exile is forceful, painful and full of nostalgic longing. However, modern diaspora" are more dynamic and unpredictable as the process of dislocation and regeneration are often played out in the context of globalization" (Reis, p. 53). Modern diaspora's dislocation may not necessarily be forceful. Seeking better opportunities, modern people may roam around globally on their own will.

Similarly, the term 'hybridity' defies cultural confinements. Edward Said states that hybrid experiences "partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy... simple dogma and loud patriotism. Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences than they consciously exclude" (1993, p.15). When the concept of hybridity is applied in the study of culture, it refers to the process of mutual borrowing. At that time, cultures differing to each other come together, blend, interact and produce an in-between situation.

In the similar fashion, Evan Mwangi defines double consciousness as the worldview and practice. Under double consciousness "a community and individuals are aware of complimentary difference that constitutes them and are ready ...to tolerate other groups and individuals with different worldviews" (2007, p.51). They also frankly adopt dissimilar elements from other cultures into their own. So, double consciousness as a by-product of hybridity keeps affiliation to two opposing sides remaining at the borderline of culture, language, nationality and the like. Despite the fact that Rumi Laskar Bora comes from the Assamese cultural background, she selects the subject matter of Nepalese diaspora in the novel *Damphu* and follows the trajectory of a Nepali diaspora starting from Nepal. She successfully celebrates the theme of hybridity at the level of culture,

nationality, language and love as well. The fictional protagonist Jung, through his double consciousness, defies purist ideology and performs double attachment.

#### Research Methodology

This article explores and analyses how the Assamese novelist Rumi Laskar Bora's novel *Damphu* based on diasporic theme articulates double consciousness mainly of the protagonist Jung. He imagines Nepal as his biological mother and Assam as his foster mother. For theoretical support, insights are borrowed from the theorists and researchers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Michele Reis, Edward Said, Evan Mwangi, Brian Stross and G. Sheffer. Among them, Mikhail Bakhtin, Edward Said and Paul Gilroy are vocal about hybridity, Mwangi about double consciousness, Michele Reis and G. Sheffer about diaspora. Hybridity and double consciousness operate at the levels of language, love, culture and nationality as well. The protagonist Jung in the novel *Damphu* repeatedly articulates his affiliation to both Nepalese and Assamese nationality and culture. Jung's loyalty to both of the women namely his wife Januka in Assam and his beloved Radha in Nepal also exposes his double consciousness in love. Jung's affiliation to the land of settlement and his nostalgic attachment to the land of origin makes his life hybridized. Further, his use of language also draws words and phrases from both Nepali and Assamese. His cultural bifurcation requires hybridity as a tool to analyse his doubleness of existence.

#### Textual Analysis

The novel *Damphu: The Rhythms of Life*, written originally in Assamese and translated in English, articulates a diasporic character's double vision. Crossing his boundary of nationalism and standing at the transnational space, Jung loves both of the phenomena from his homeland and destination land. The hybrid orientation comes out of its pre-designed parochial establishment. Hybridity, as Mwangi comments "reaches out to forms of expression and experiences beyond established boundaries" ((Mwangi, 2007, p.45). Nar, renamed

as Jung born in Daman, Nepal fought the war in Burma on behalf of the British Gurkha army, got injured in the war and after the treatment process, entered Assam to try to luck. The modern liberal definition incorporates him as a diaspora uprooted from the land of origin and constantly living in reminiscences. The narrator comments, "He [Jung] knew that he could not even think of going back to Nepal. He had thoughts of going back there for Radha but those were immature thoughts of an immature lover boy" (Bora, 2020, p.131). Jung's double consciousness about the Nepalese past and the Assamese present puts him at the hybrid point of belonging to two opposite sides. The narrator comments as 'immature' to Jung's desire to return Nepal.

Jung survives with his nostalgia of the young age love even in the battlefield. When Birendra, who had barred him from marrying Radha, was killed in the war in Burma, Jung helplessly wished he could have saved Birendra and softly murmurs, "Please, forgive me Radha. Forgive me for all my failings" (Bora, 2020, p.66). Jung's love to Radha, though a vast geographical distance survives between them and his magnanimity to the previous enemy indicate his double vision. Disregarding his inimical relations with Birendra in Nepal, years back, Jung remorsefully comments, "In this alien land, I got to know you, see your good side and now when I feel like embracing you as a friend. You have gone away from me never to return. Forgive me my dear friend. I could never do justice to you" (Bora, p.65). Jung's diasporic self beyond the national border survives with hybrid psyche. He magnanimously forgets his hostile relations with Birendra in Nepal years back.

Drawing a line of difference between pure and hybrid, Brian Stross writes, "Pure... means relatively more homogenous in character... having less internal variation, Hybrid, the opposite, is of course more heterogeneous in character, having more internal variation" (1999, p.258). In the novel *Damphu*, Jung's co-fighter Mungri, from Burmese background, crossing his national boundary

castigates the Burmese revolutionaries who burnt down his family members and everything. To borrow Stross's phrase, Mungri is an 'internal variation' with his hybrid subjectivity, Mungri aggressively comments, "This [Burma] is no longer my motherland. This is the land of my enemies, traitors, they have finished everything" (Bora, 2020, p.56). Mungri transgresses the boundary of his nationalism as the Burmese revolutionaries were inflicting torture on the Indian and British people in Burma. The revolutionaries wanted the 'outsiders' to leave 'their' soil. Indian traders were economically rising however the Burmese landed gentry lost their property and reduced to the state of penury.

Mikhail Bakhtin postulates hybridization at the level of linguistic fusion. For him, hybridization means "the mixture of two languages, an encounter between two different linguistic consciousness" (1981, p.358). In Bora's *Damphu Jung* served at Mahajan's house in Assam in the capacity of a cowherd, even though Jung was not satisfied with the evil Mahajan's behaviour, he had a soft corner in his heart for Aideu, the wife of Mahajan. After living for a long time in Assam, Jung could fluently speak Assamese language however reading and writing were comparatively poorer. He would address Mahajan's wife as 'aai' which meant mother in Assamese language. He had understood the power, significance and emotional depth of the word 'aai'. Nepalese diaspora in Assam were turning to be hybrid in their linguistic usage. The narrator comments that Jung's "Sanima (aunt) and her family people mostly spoke in Assamese at home. They had Assamese neighbours. Intermixing of language was common" (2020, p.163). In course of time, diasporas develop hybridity in their linguistic expressions and selection of diction. The overarching system of the host land does not let them remain isolated from the linguistic system prevalent.

In today's mixed and syncretic world, nobody can retain purity and cultural exclusiveness. In this regard, Paul Gilroy comments, "We must be prepared to give up the illusion that cultural and ethnic purity has ever existed" (2000, p.251).

Hybridization is a process constantly present. Harilal, one of Jung's friends of Nepalese origin in Assam, in his festive mood says to Jung, "We are no longer Nepalese. We are Gurkhas. We have earned the epithet 'Gurkha' for ourselves. Even the Nepalese of Nepal now address us as Gurkhas, we no longer claim to be Nepalese" (Bora, 2020, p.171). In due course, the cultural ambience of Assam transforms the diaspora to develop their loyalty to the host land. However, this loyalty is not one-sided and permanent but keeps fluctuating. The narrator successfully captures Jung's bifurcated psyche of living between Assam and Nepal. At times, Jung feels:

Like going back to his native place, to Nepal, But then he knew that time had changed. The Daman of now must be very different from the Daman that he had known. He would have to start everything afresh. Would he be able to herd sheep like in the past? Would he be able to harvest the terrains of Daman once again? Was the sheep grazing area as before? Would things be same? And ... His own mother must have given up all hopes of seeing him. She must think him to be dead. It had been such a long time how he wished to see her again. (Bora, p.203)

Jung's hybrid subjectivity does not let him to remain unwavering to his host land. The memories drive him to his birthplace where his mother is perhaps waiting. Jung's double consciousness on one hand inspires him to create a new world in the place of current habitation, on the other hand, his longing to the land left behind lures him repeatedly.

The narrator draws similarities of Jung with the Hindu mythological characters Krishna from *Mahabharata*. The narrator's comment on Jung's hybrid status sounds more logical, "Nepal was his [Jung's] biological mother... just like Krishna's mother Debaki, Nepal was his birthplace but Assam was like Krishna's Jasoda, his foster mother" (Bora, 2020, p.221). In today's context, the term diaspora does not refer only to such classical groups as Jews, Greeks and



Armenians. Now the term has acquired broader semantic domain. The protagonist Jung does not belong to the definition of classical diaspora, as he is not a forceful expellee from his homeland. G. Sheffer's definition of modern diaspora reads simple but poignant, "[They] are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and martial links with their countries of origin" (1986, p.3). However, the host land is equally respectful to them. The narrator of the novel *Damphu* evaluates Jung's attachment with his host land Assam and motherland Nepal as follows:

Assam was the land which fed him and made him capable in life. There was no comparison between the two mothers. Each one had her own rightful and special place in his life. Comparing them would be like insulting them. He had become a part of the land that he called his own. He had adopted the Assamese language and culture his own. He would create a new society there along with the people of the land which had given him shelter and protection. It was only because of him that the dense jungle on the banks of the Kapili had become habitable .... and hospitable. He had created his own living out of nature. He had not looted anyone's rightful property. (Bora, 2020, p.221)

Jung's outlook towards his homeland is ambivalent. If he has a choice, he doesn't choose to return as the homeland is just an ideal but practically it turns to be uncomfortable and unwelcoming to a diaspora. Nonetheless, the senses of yearning and distancing keep recurring.

Jung's dividedloknath self between the homeland and host land manifest strongly with his hybrid subjectivity. The narrator comments, "He could not stop his tears from flowing. His emotions feel freely, one eye representing the milky clear falls of Daman and the other representing the enchanting falls of the Xunakusi hills. Both were his own, both dear to him, both represented parts of his

own heart" (Bora, p.221). Jung's diasporic subjectivity is entangled between the clear falls of Daman and the enchanting falls of the Xunakusi hills.

The hybrid subjectivity of Jung mostly falls in contradiction. His desire and decision to go to Nepal, time again "fizzled out like a flattened balloon" (Bora, p.242). Sometimes, Jung grows sentimental and broods over something. Capturing those moments his wife Janaki asks him the reason. He admits his helplessness and reveals himself, "Whenever I sit by the Kiling, the memories of my life at Daman come rolling down. The memories make me nostalgic" (Bora, p.246). Jung's neither-here-nor-there sort of hybrid mentality keeps him rolling back and forth between Daman and Assam.

The subjectivity of a diaspora remains in the process of transformation. Shyam Selvadurai states that the cultural identity of diaspora, "stresses not just who one was in the past but who one might be in the process of becoming" (5). Sometimes, Jung would think making a far better world in Assam. He had willingly chosen the land of Assam after leaving the battlefield in Burma. In Assam "he was going to create a new village, a new society, a new culture. He was filled with renewed vigour and energy" (Bora, p.221). Jung was torn apart between his in-laws in Assam and family members including sweetheart Radha in Daman, Nepal. Jung had formed a new world in Assam. The narrator reveals, "Janaki's parents were like his own *ama, buba*. Rukmini and Padma were like sisters to him. Harilal and Bhim daju were like his own brothers, too" (Bora, p.242). Nevertheless, at times, Jung felt serious deficiency in his life. His desire to return Nepal lurked deep down his psyche and occasionally burst it out. The narrator interrogates, "Why was it that he sometimes felt like leaving everything behind and setting off to Nepal immediately?" (Bora, p.242). The same bifurcated hybrid subjectivity is the reason behind.

In Evan Mwangi's definition, hybridity is "the practice of enriching one's own culture, epoch, language and genre through guarded acceptance and use of

the characteristics of another genre, culture, era and language" (2007, p.44). Modern diasporas like Jung in the novel *Damphu*, in course of time, happen to follow culture and language of the land of relocation. Through the repeated use, they make it a part of their life and forget what is their originality is and what is not. Jung is confused about the Nepalese and Assamese name of a flower. The narrator states, "He had almost forgotten the Nepalese tongue. Actually, it was not bhatgilla but kokmehandu in Nepali. Bhatgilla was the Assamese name for kokmehandu. It was but natural for him to imbibe the language and culture of the place where he had been living and breathing in its air for so long" (Bora, p.262). Cultural and linguistic intermixing make diaspora's lifestyle full of double consciousness that according to Mwangi, "merges from hybridity" (2007, p.51). Jung is an exemplary model of modern diaspora bearing cultural and linguistic hybridity.

In addition to linguistic hybridity, Jung equally loves and reveres his birthplace Nepal and his place of settlement Assam. His loyalty between these two places is divided. Diaspora engage in the juxtaposition of ambivalent notions between two worlds. They sometimes awfully discover that they belong to nowhere. Jung's duality of belonging is remarkable as he "had been living in Assam for the past five years. He had come to like the place and love it like his own. He loved the rivers, the mountains, and the soft flowing breeze of Assam. The place didn't seem alien to him. It felt like his own. Like Nepal, his birthplace, Assam too had its share of plains and hills, vales and valleys. Just like the hills of his native Daman, the hill of Sitajakhala and Xunkusi behind the Kiling also stood tall" (Bora, p.130). Living with the duality of mind is diasporic fate. They can neither delete their past from the memory nor embrace the new circumstances wholeheartedly. The diasporic realization of belonging to both sides but ultimately not belonging to anywhere grows severely painful. Such plight of hybridity is connected with diasporic existence.

### Conclusion

This research article on *Damphu: The Rhythms of Life*, an Assamese novel written by Romi Laskar Bora, exposes hybridity mainly of the protagonist Jung at cultural and linguistic level. Migrated from Daman, Nepal to Assam of India, Jung is a diaspora culturally uprooted from this homeland. From the borderline, Jung maintains strong cultural ties to his homeland and the host land. Double consciousness turns to be a fate of diaspora. As an outcome of hybridity, double consciousness establishes a relation between the homeland and the destination land. Instead of making homeland a site of residency, it is an ideal, so diaspora revives a connection with the prior home. For Jung, Nepal is biological home and Assam, the place that has ascertained his residency is something like a foster mother. Moreover, the novelist draws a mythical allusion of *Mahabharata* to compare Jung's dual affiliation that is Jung as Krishna, Nepal as Devaki, the biological mother and Assam as Jasoda, the foster mother. This association with the mythical characters posits Jung at the borderline of culture and nationality from where he cannot associate himself only on a single side.

Naturally, a diaspora's psychology survives in duality. Their emotional links with the cultural homeland and attachments with the place of current habitation keeps the diaspora ever in swinging position. The protagonist in the novel *Damphu* seems doubly conscious in terms of language, culture, nationality and love as well. The waterfalls from both of the lands Nepal and Assam are respectable to him. In his linguistic expression, interchange between Nepali and Assamese words are quite noticeable. At times, Jung and his Nepali fellows in Assam love calling themselves not Nepali but Gurkha. They just want to disengage their Nepalese identity. Other times, they wish to come in touch with Nepal. Such ambivalence Jung shows in his love as well especially after he marries Januka. He emotionally moves back and forth between Radha in Nepal and Januka in Assam.

In our time, cultures are dynamic. In the meantime, no culture is fully pure and unaffected. Diaspora people are one of the key agents who make cultural interactions possible worldwide. Diasporas themselves grow hybrid after cultural crosspollinations on the multicultural platforms. In the novel *Damphu*, Assam turns to be a location encompassing people from plural cultural backgrounds. Jung and his Nepalese fellows sometimes earnestly long for their homeland; other times, maintain a distance from it showing their diasporic dilemma.

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