violence or of the exotic Other?

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The essays in the volume employ a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches — literary, historical, anthropological, interpretative politics, and an analytical study of contemporary issues, engaging the people, cultures, and histories in the Northeast with a new outlook. In the study, the region emerges as a place of new happenings in which there is the possibility of continuous expansion of the horizon of history and issues of current relevance facilitating new voices and narratives that circulate and create bonding in the borderland of South, East and Southeast Asia.

The book will be influential in building scholarship on the lived experiences of the people of the Northeast, which, in turn, promises potentialities of connections, community, and peace in the region.

Yasmin Saikia is Hardt-Nickachos Chair in Peace Studies and Professor of History at Arizona State University.

Amit R. Baishya is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the University of Oklahoma.
Northeast India

Can we keep thinking of Northeast India as a site of violence or of the exotic Other?

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Northeast India
A Place of Relations

Edited by
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Difficult Loves
Purity and Hardship

Dolly Kikon

I know how to walk the walk
I know how to talk the talk
But when it comes to Anguish
The language I cry in
Gives me away

— Senti Toy, The Language I Cry (2005)

Introduction

Often the relationship between citizens and the state is perceived through the lens of governance and regulation (Chatterjee, 2004; Gupta, 1995; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal, 1997). It was certainly my intent to see the state in this way. I arrived in the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland to pursue an ethnographic study about state violence and resource conflicts. However, I realized that accounts from the foothill border increasingly took the form of narratives of a very specific type. One of the most popular expressions in which foothill residents told their stories was by invoking morom, a broad term for love and affection in Nagamese, the lingua franca spoken in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland.
Morom captures multiple emotions and relations, and is not limited to romantic love or affection. It refers to relations of patronage between servant and master; bonding between friends; attachment and care between parents and children as well as the relationship between the state and the public, or lust, attraction and adoration between lovers. In addition, mercy, gratitude, sympathy, grace, compassion and charity are all encompassed as acts of morom. I met lovers and spouses who shared stories of abuse and violence, but layered their tortured lives in the language of sacrifice, and came across names of places and landmarks identified as sites of love.

What is distinct about the expressions of morom is the manner in which all kinds of attachments and affections are incorporated. Expressions for lust and physical attractions are categorized as ‘bhal’ or ‘good/like,’ which is also used to express desire for inanimate objects like clothes or sensory tastes pertaining to movies and food. Sexual intercourse is expressed as ‘bia kam/lettera kam’ or ‘bad activity/dirty activity.’ The same expressions are used to describe rape and violation since there is no word for ‘rape’ or sexual abuse in Nagamese. My point here is to emphasize how morom is not isomorphic with the English word love but resonates with everyday articulations and declarations of affections. In this chapter, I examine how everyday experiences of residents in the violent and unstable Assam-Nagaland foothill border shapes what actions constitute morom. Such an understanding will allow us to connect how politics of territoriality and assertions for pure histories drives social groups to establish the definition of affection and its limits as well.

Grounded in specific geographical locations, the competing maps of ethnic homelands and nations across Northeast India overlap and crisscross at multiple geographical zones. Often, it is impossible to see where one territorial claim ends and another begins. In the midst of the multi-coloured shadings of various homelands across the hills and plains in Northeast India, the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland is a significant place. Like many foothill borders across Northeast India, it is in such entangled diverse landscapes that the moral and political boundaries for homelands and identities are the most vocal and passionate.

**My heart will be empty without you**

I started thinking about love during my fieldwork in 2010 one night after a long, tiring day of interviews in the foothill border between Assam and Nagaland. I was staying in a foothill town. The household had three members: the father, mother and their son. All the other children had left. Some were married and had settled in neighbouring villages, while others had left for the city to pursue their studies and seek employment. I was given a room that had belonged to one of the children who had since left the house. It was the end of November and the nights were cold, so I added my shawl to the blanket that was given to me to keep warm. I looked around the room and my gaze lingered on a dressing table lined with old albums, empty cream and powder containers and small plastic decorative pieces. The dogs were howling on the street, as I lay in my bed tired but unable to fall asleep.

‘My heart will be empty without you.’ A heart shaped plastic decoration hanging on the wall caught my attention. Along with plastic flowers and other items such as empty containers and photo frames, this slightly faded plastic stand stared at me. I wondered who had been given this piece – which child? Was it at school? Was it a gift from a first love? And then I began to wonder: how would it be to fall in love in a place like this? This question partly stemmed from my frustration, exhaustion and the bitter cold, but it was more from my experience of this town. ‘Where is everyone?’ I wondered one afternoon as I entered the town. There were no signs of life on the streets, except for the street dogs barking and chasing each other around. All the shops were shut down and everyone was indoors. ‘These are bad days,’ my hosts whispered as they instructed the driver to keep his eyes and ears open and to guard the jeep in which we travelled to the town. Later that night, the host’s son recommended that we unplug the jeep battery and bring it indoors, as he told us stories about thieves and drug addicts who picked up vehicles, water pumps and anything they could lay their hands on.

I learned that my arrival coincided with the arrival of the two Naga insurgent groups in town. Since the 1950s, Naga insurgents in the hills have waged a protracted war with the Indian state, demanding the right to self-determination (Lotha, 2007; Kikon, 2005, 2009). Between 1975 and 1989, the armed movement split into three factions, which led to violent conflicts over issues of control and authority in the hills. My host described how residents were caught in a battle between two powerful armed groups, the Naga Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak and Muivah), commonly referred as NSCN (IM), and the Naga Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang), known as the NSCN (K). The conflict was over the right to collect the ‘national tax’ and control the town. Ultimately the two groups came to an understanding. Every three months, there was a transfer of power between the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) to collect the ‘national tax’ and control the town and its surrounding villages.
During such power transfers, there were dangers of misrepresentation. Like possessive owners protecting their homes and possessions, the insurgent groups were suspicious and stopped vehicles, interrogated new faces they saw and watched movements on the streets, so it was best to remain indoors and avoid any unpleasant encounters.

In many protracted armed conflicts around the world, the language of love, devotion and sacrifice has been invoked to fight for a homeland perceived as a nation in crisis, under attack and threatened by a foreign dominant sovereign. The Naga national struggle has witnessed this process as well. There are numerous accounts of Naga men and women who have died in the Indo-Naga armed conflict for the love of the Naga nation (Banerjee, 2008; Iralu, 2001; Kikon, 2004; Sanyu, 1996). There are memoirs of Naga soldiers, families, clans and at times entire villages that were devoted to the case of the Naga people's struggle for independence. Thus, borrowing the phase from Sharika Thiranagama, 'one must either love it or feel obligated to love it,' this notion of love, in the case of the struggle for a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka, emerged from the social pressure to reinforce a particular set of values and beliefs (Thiranagama, 2011: 19). This act of devotion and love for the homeland co-existed with a threat of transgression that came from members within the community. In such a situation, the devoted love for a homeland is perceived as a transgression when there are, in Mary Douglas's terms, 'lapses from righteousness.' Douglas explains that the act of transgression operates in a logic that seems to suggest that, 'which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it' (Douglas, 1966: 3–4). The process of identifying the act of purity and punishment is set in place in order to impose a system of order.

In Northeast India, multiple ethnic insurgent groups have waged wars against the Indian state, demanding homelands and sovereignty for more than half a century. Here, the emphasis on love and sacrifice is paramount. In villages along the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland, the understanding about sovereignty is generally a territorial demarcation between villages and farmlands between the state of Assam and Nagaland. However, this demarcation is one that is primarily marked by the ethnic bodies that move and dwell in this violent landscape. For instance, the very essence of Naga-ness or who are the Assamese is constantly defined by identifying oneself as one or the other. Such allegiance to exclusive territorial homelands opens up a specific rhetoric about love and belonging that has to be flawless, unadulterated and pure. In that context, how are attachments and intimacies in a vibrant multi-ethnic society like the foothill villages framed? What kinds of everyday practices do foothill residents define and legitimize as love? On the backdrop of a passionate politics about ethno-nationalist love, I increasingly came across stories of difficult and impure relationships in the heterogeneous communities across the foothills.

Impure love: the politics of purity

I met Lulu unexpectedly. During an interview I was conducting with a trader in a foothill town, I paused my recorder for a break. As I made my way to the backyard for some fresh air, I saw a frail woman hunched over a mountain of clothes beside the water tank. She was a part-time domestic helper, working in four or five houses washing dishes, clothes, sweeping the house and picking up trash. The women from the household, the daughters-in-law of the trader, came and chatted with me about my research. When I explained that I was writing about different people who lived and worked in this foothill border town, they pointed to Lulu and said, 'She is a Naga. She also lives in Sonari town!' At that moment I was unaware that their joy in showcasing the cosmopolitan nature of their town would lead me to encounter violent expressions of cosmopolitanism. Lulu appeared embarrassed but quickly regained her composure and we began talking. She asked me where I was staying and we smiled at one another as I went inside the house to resume my interview. After I returned to my room in the afternoon and wrote down my notes, she was missing from my field notes. I assumed that there was nothing special or important about my brief conversation with Lulu and I almost forgot about her.

I was surprised when my hostess informed me that I had a guest outside waiting to see me. Lulu was sitting on the front porch. She was on her way home and wanted to talk to me. 'I was not like this,' Lulu started her story. I had not asked for her story but I realized that sometimes people want to tell their stories more as a way of explaining how they got to a certain place where they cannot recognize themselves. I sat on the porch with her as she gave an account of her love story and I wondered what to do: help her escape from the foothills or inform the police about her situation.

'I was studying in high school when I fell in love and eloped with my husband,' Lulu recounted, explaining how she ended up in the foothills. Her husband's family lived in this foothill town and so they came here to settle down. Life in this foothill town was difficult for her because her husband was
a drug addict. He beat her up and burned her body with cigarette butts. Lulu blamed it on the drugs. She said that she stayed in the marriage because of ‘morom laye karna’ or ‘for the sake of love.’ ‘This is not the life I imagined, but it turned out this way,’ she told me. She never contacted her family in Nagaland after that. ‘They must think I am dead,’ she said. Lulu said her father passed away and her mother remarried and moved away to a different town. She reminisced about her friends who might have graduated from college. Her mind was focused on death, which she described as the ultimate sacrifice of love. She emphasized that she will die for the sake of her family, her five children and her husband.

She saw death as the only way out of this ‘dukkh’ or ‘difficulty.’ Only in death would she find redemption from the love that was consuming her. It was a violent and miserable love story. I assumed that she would prefer to go back to her extended family and relatives in Nagaland, but she said there was ‘nobody’ in the hills. Neither her family nor her clan members would take her back. The hills, which she had described as her ghar, or ‘home’, had become an inaccessible place. According to Lulu, by marrying a man from a different ethnic group she had stepped outside the ring of purity. She was not only an impure woman: even worse, she gave birth to children of mixed blood and thus became an outsider. On what logic are ways of belonging to a man from a different ethnic group defined and expressed?

What is the essence of Naga-ness? What are the characteristics of a ‘Naga,’ specifically those of a Naga woman in the framework that incarcerates her identity within a domestic, patriarchal and conjugal prison? Often, the moral leaders from various ethnic groups in the foothills reminded me that women did not have their ‘story.’ In their view, women inherited the story of their husbands or fathers. Women’s bodies, their speeches, memories and experiences were treated as biological recorders for the male figures in their lives. This explained why accounts of biological relationships and the concept of the patriarchal family became a fertile ground to define ethnic purity across the foothills and beyond. Lulu all but disappeared within a most exploitative domestic sphere, and as an impoverished daily wage domestic helper in the foothill town. Ethnic groups in India’s Northeast frontiers have increasingly mobilized for political recognition based on exclusive cultural identities rooted to specific geographical areas (Karlsson, 2011; Manchanda, 2004; Saikia, 2004). The emphasis on demands for exclusive homelands in the hills and plains often led to ethnic conflicts across several federal units in these frontier region (Asian Center for Human Rights, 2005).1

**Locating markers of purity**

The emphasis on ethnic purity has become an important political and moral marker to claim territorial rights in Northeast India. Liisa Malkki described how notions of purity played an important role in constructing ethnic identity among the refugee communities in Tanzania (Malkki, 1996). According to Malkki, the Hutu refugees who lived in the camps constantly engaged in reconstructing their history of person-hood and valued their sufferings because it kept them pure and prepared them to return to the homeland in Burundi as the rightful natives. The camp refugees recognized themselves as a nation in exile and their refusal to establish a sense of belonging and settle down in a foreign land deeply informed their cosmology of belonging. Being a refugee became a moral claim that especially made them believe that they were the legitimate people in exile destined to return to their homeland. The homeland that the camp refugees longed to return to, according to Malkki, emerged as a moral destination.

Contrary to the camp refugees, the town refugees were not concerned with purity as those in the camps and negotiated with multiple identities and practices that were grounded in the social context of the township they inhabited. As Malkki says, the town refugees embraced a creolized, hybrid and cosmopolitan identity and rejected identities such as refugee or Hutu and other similar ethnic or national markers. The manner in which the camp refugees perceived their town counterparts as rootless and impure illustrates how notions of belongings and spatial categories are intimately shaped by the life experiences. The lives of the foothill residents are somewhat similar to the lives of the town refugees that Malkki describes. However, unlike the distinct sites that separated the camp and the town refugees, the foothill landscape is something else. The pure and impure ethnic groups inhabit the same towns and live in the neighbourhood.

Thus the notion of the impure body in the foothills, as we have seen in Lulu’s story, is also a traitor; someone who is a member of the community but seeks to destabilize the politics of ethnic mobilization for exclusive cultural identities and homelands. In Lulu’s case, Adam, a tribal leader, described her as a ‘threat’ that could damage the purity of ethnic groups. However, Lulu was invisible to the legal and social institutions irrespective of the violence and abuse she suffered. Legal and political protection was reserved for the powerful traders, business people, and ethnic leaders in the foothills. When I enquired in the police station about domestic violence, the police officer reminded me, ‘If the husband does not beat his wife, who will beat her up?’
The idea of domestic abuse as part of marital love and discipline did not remain within the police station. This belief was also rampant among the cultural leaders and members who occupied positions of power in the area. Thus, Lulu’s case moved between the legal and the moral communities in the town. The moral communities included political leaders and tribal councils who defined the social sanctions of their respective social groups and regulated the purity and pollution practices in the foothills. Many of the communities distinctly marked their cultural and social differences by privileging their history and suffering of living in the unstable foothills over that of others. Therefore, the everyday practices of ethnic purity and ways of belonging as witnessed in Lulu’s case significantly determined a person’s status in the social world of the foothill town.

When I approached Adam, the tribal leader in a foothill town about cases of intermarriage, he refused to recognize that there were intermarriages between different ethnic groups. ‘If a Naga man falls in love with an Assamese woman, it is a sin, and there will be a punishment. The family will fall ill or the children will die,’ the tribal leader asserted.1 Intermarriages and stories about lovers from different ethnic groups who eloped were common. But the refusal to recognize and acknowledge such practices were directly linked to the politics of reiterating the fiction of ethnic and cultural purity and to retain, what Etienne Balibar refers to it as the ‘internal borders’ of the social unit. According to Balibar, these internal borders in the social lives of ethnic communities and nations reflected the ‘problematic’ of purity or purification, and the uncertainties around which the ‘inside can be penetrated or adulterated by its relation with the outside’ (Balibar, 1994: 63).

Love occupies a central place in the formulation of group identities. According to Sara Ahmed, groups who apply the language of love do so to invoke passion and defend the nation against others. She argues how the bond between members of such groups relies on the transference of love to the leader. In this process of shared orientation, the ego of the leader is pushed toward the loved objects – the nation and homelands. But more importantly, the process also assumes the characteristics of the lost or threatened object of love. Therefore, the loss or threats to homelands conjures a deep sense of mourning and grief. Sorrow becomes an important expression of love (Ahmed, 2003).3 Tribal leaders like Adam wielded immense power and formed a political framework to preserve ethnic purity and ‘culture.’ Culture has been an important locus for naturalizing power, practices, and hierarchies. According to feminist anthropologists Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, ‘Culture is what makes the boundaries of domains seem natural. (This perception of culture is) what gives ideologies power, and what makes hegemonies appear seamless...this creative dialectic of the concept (of culture) depends on our commitments to use it as an incitement to continually rethink what is same and what is different, how they are so and what this means...’ Therefore, Yanagisako and Delaney note that the field of culture has become a productive site for discussions on nature, power and culture. (Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995: 19).

Pure histories and impure memories
What were the criteria to assess love? What was love and not love in the foothills? ‘Itu morom noboi’ or ‘this is not love,’ Adam, the tribal leader explained as he distinguished between love and all other acts. I enquired if he remembered any other accounts about falling in love outside the one’s social group. He paused and said, ‘Except for the Dalimi story from Naginimora we have no other story in the foothills.’ Even a lover of ethnic purity could not escape this story of Dalimi and Gadapani. According to legend, Dalimi was a Naga who married the Ahom King Gadapani and became a queen in the valley. Over the centuries, the lore of Dalimi and Gadapani, the Ahom king from the eighteenth century has become both legendary and historical.

What makes this love story immortal lore is the location of queen Dalimi’s burial site. According to legend, Dalimi requested the king to return her body to the hills when she died. But her funereal convoy could not make it to the hills and she was buried in the foothills. A town called Naginimora, literally translated as the place where the Naga queen died, came up around her burial site. Today, it is a busy coal-mining town, which attracts thousands of prospective traders and business companies. The outskirts of Naginimora town are one of the many disputed sites between the states of Assam and Nagaland, since both have overlapping claims. During land conflicts in this part of the foothills, elders from the surrounding Naga and Ahom villages, in order to reconcile the warring groups, narrate the legend of Dalimi and Gadapani to reiterate their shared history and ties of friendship and solidarity.

Residents in Naginimora town told me that the town council members had erected a concrete shed with a small iron gate and a tin roof to honour the memory of queen Dalimi. The council members aimed at making Naginimora town a tourist spot where people could visit the queen’s grave, but the project fell through and the government forgot about maintaining the decorated grave.
It is well known that the rise of the modern state is centred on the politics of exclusion; exclusive territories, official histories and pure memories. Thus, in this case, neither the state of Nagaland nor Assam is able to fully appropriate the accounts of Dalimi and Gadapani. As for the central Indian state, this legend from Northeast India is peripheral, like its inhabitants, and therefore immaterial for the construction of an Indian national identity. During my fieldwork, several historians who worked on Assam relegated the accounts of Dalimi and Gadapani to a myth. They asserted that Gadapani was a real historical figure, but dismissed Dalimi as a work of Assamese literary fiction penned by a renowned Assamese playwright, Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The absence of Dalimi’s name from the Buranj, the Ahom historical chronicles, was cited as proof that such a person never existed.

However, the historian Jayeeta Sharma has a different take on revering historical records and texts as sacrosanct. She explains how the establishment of an official Assamese history in the twentieth century often blurred the distinctions between history and fiction. Citing works of prominent Assamese intellectuals and scholars like Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Rajani Kanta Bordoloi and Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Sharma describes that several elaborate fictional dialogues, narratives and characters were employed to inspire the reader. She elaborates how one of the central reasons for writing Assamese history in ‘faux-historical (and) semi fictional vein,’ was to stir the readers with a sense of ‘sacrifice and redemption’ (Sharma, 2011: 224--225). Her insight about Gadapani’s queen Jaymati is particularly important to problematize the fact versus fiction narrative of constructing a nationalist history in the twentieth century in the Brahmaputra valley and beyond.

According to Sharma, within the genre of such historical writings in Assam, the most popular theme is the story of the Ahom King Gadapani’s wife, Jaymati. According to lore, after Gadapani learned about a conspiracy in the Ahom royal court to kill him, his wife Jaymati helped him to escape to the hills. Jaymati endured torture and death at the hands of his enemies but refused to give him up. According to legend, it was during Gadapani’s exile in the hills, that he fell in love and married Dalimi. Sharma notes that male literary figures like Lakshminath Bezbaruah frequently borrowed from popular folklore and ballads that women sang in Upper Assam but failed to acknowledge their sources. She further notes how the figure of the pious wife of Gadapani who sacrificed her life for her beloved husband is not mentioned in the extant chronicles of the Ahom dynasty.

In Assam, 27 March is marked as the commemoration day of Sati Jaymati. Listed as one of the ‘famous people’ of Assam, a local website in Assam presents her family genealogy and her life as an Ahom queen. Today, Jaymati is a symbol of purity, pioussness, sacrifice and loyalty for the Assamese nation. However, the figure of Dalimi remains trapped in the foothills, embraced by its residents but dismissed by scholars and intellectuals alike invested in establishing an exclusive history. Several Naga villages invoked the story of Dalimi and Gadapani and presented competing versions about their union. I came across a story from a Phom Naga village where the villagers said that Dalimi belonged to their tribe. She was known as Watlong. They described how Watlong’s (Dalimi’s) family and relatives kept in touch with her after she became a queen in the valley. According to the Phom Naga legend, during the harvest festival in the hills, Dalimi’s family dropped red rhododendrons on the Dikhow River, a river that flows from the hills of Nagaland down to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam to wish her well and let her know that she was in their thoughts. In the neighbouring villages, the Konyak Naga tribe made similar claims.

Just like the Phom and Konyak villagers who claimed that Dalimi belonged to their villages, there were multiple versions about the union of Dalimi and Gadapani all along the foothills. However, no village or tribe managed to appropriate Dalimi and Gadapani’s story as a mono-ethnic narrative. In the eyes of the multiple states present along the foothills, the Dalimi and Gadapani story has increasingly become a subversive agenda, which propagates an alternative political project about shared sovereignty. Today, Dalimi’s grave is a forgotten tourist spot. It has been reduced to a small concrete shed beside a dusty road that leads to the coal mine. During the summer, the road is covered with red slush and landslides making it extremely difficult to travel. In winter, the grass, shrubs and trees around Dalimi’s grave have a thick layer of fine red dust generated by the high traffic of trucks carrying coal, timber and people from the mountains.

It appears that when the council members from the town of Nagingmora forgot Dalimi’s grave, it opened up a world of activities and meanings. Animals were attracted to the grave site for shelter, and lovers from surrounding villages found it as a place to meet. Children also left behind charcoal drawings on the walls, and coal traders and workers from the surrounding coalmines sat there for cigarette breaks. Part real, part legend, Dalimi rests in this dusty foothill spot. Her gravesite is covered with creepers, wild ferns, red dust and coal debris. The legend of Dalimi and Gadapani does not require a material
site like a grave to be remembered. While Adam, the tribal leader, argued that purity was the only option to maintain an order in the foothills, the competing versions about the legend of Dalimi and Gadapani ruptured exclusivist state-making projects.

Today, ethnic groups in the foothills invoke the legend of Dalimi and Gadapani to remind one another of a shared past. This shows us that social realities and memories in places like the foothills are like ‘bleeding boundaries’ (Malkki, 1992: 26) that blur the borders, be it about facts and myths, or purity and transgressions. At the same time, it is important to understand the practices and processes that allude to neat ethnic classifications. Thus, Lulu’s story is eventually about establishing a social structure of order to regulate society through particular ways of asserting authority, hierarchy and power. In this context, the tribal leader, Adam as an earnest leader who sought to end the foothill border conflict between the state of Assam and Nagaland asserted that the only solution to the foothill border dispute was to maintain ethnic purity. He said, ‘Only the pure ethnic groups can sit together and solve the dispute’.

The solution was a territorial division. All the troublemakers, according to the tribal leader Adam, were subjects like Lulu giving birth to mixed-race children and the ‘outsiders’ who were settled in the foothills. He was partly correct. The foothills of Assam were a site that shaped a global brand; the Assam tea plantations, the timber business, oil and now the coal trade. These activities brought a disparate group of people from around the world; planters from London, indentured labourers from central India, tea technicians from China, oil engineers from Russia, migrant workers from Bihar and business companies from Gujarat and Rajasthan. The only way to understand the transformation of the foothills was by getting an insight regarding the lines that demarcate the foreign, and the processes by which the foreign, at times, becomes the source that inspires us and becomes a life-transforming journey.

I love you: embracing the foreign

One day in a foothill village I came across a group of teenagers exchanging remarks about the distinction between the Nagamese word *morom* and its rough English equivalent love. One young boy responding to his friends who teased him about his *morom* for a girl in the neighbourhood, said, ‘*Hoi, boi mot mur kukur aru mekuri-k u morom koru!’ or ‘Yes, yes I also love my dog and cat!’ But his friends reminded him, ‘*Holii, itu toh I love you aas!’ or ‘even so, this is an I love you!’ There was a burst of laughter, whistling, and intensified teasing. The meaning of love was suddenly more definite and unambiguous for the teenagers, but their exchanges also become more pointed and wild. It was as though the visible language of love was not Nagamese, but English. It was also striking how the teenagers seemed to connect the English word love with touch and sex as they provoked their friend to kiss the girl.

Until that point, the teenage boys played around with the language of *morom*, which as we saw above encompasses a wide range of love and affection. *Morom* also possessed elements of fun, hope and excitement for the teenagers as it gave them the possibility to improvize and create multiple interpretations about what *morom* meant to them. It encompassed affection for household pets, parents and the girl from the neighbourhood. What was the language of love in the foothills? Often, I came across conversations which explained the romantic affairs between young people as, ‘a case of I love you.’

The invocation of ‘I love you’ in English appeared to convey a definitive clear message and defined the relationship between young lovers. It avoided the messiness that *morom* brought into the picture.

However, not until I visited Molong Ali, an octogenarian trader in Sonari, a foothill town, did I realize how the English phrase ‘I love you’ had actually transformed the lives of people like him. Sonari town is a hub of business and the coal trade. When I enquired about the history of the town, residents directed me towards Ali; the oldest resident and the unofficial town historian. I sat in Ali’s living room and listened to his stories about the foothills. He sat beneath a huge wall hanging depicting the holy city of Mecca, a tapestry he had picked up during his Haj pilgrimage two years ago. I was pleasantly surprised when Ali said, ‘I never imagined settling down in this town. I had plans to go to London.’ When I enquired why he decided to stay back, he told me it was love that held him back.

He began to tell his life story from the time he met his beloved late wife, Begum. They were married for fifty years and had four children together. When the doctors in Assam declared that she had cancer, Ali took his ailing wife to London. ‘I never imagined settling down in this town. I had plans to go to London.’ When I enquired why he decided to stay back, he told me it was love that held him back.

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Ali was an orphan who grew up in the foothill town as an apprentice in his uncle's tailoring shop. When he became an adult, he opened his own shop. ‘One day I fell ill and was running a high temperature,’ he said. With no one to care for him, his neighbour, an old lady, volunteered to clean his house and look after him. It was a small town and people started wondering why Ali’s shop was closed for a week. ‘Even the officer from the police station asked why the tailor shop was closed,’ Ali said. ‘And your wife...?’ I asked him. ‘Wait, wait.’ He waved his hand and signalled me to slow down. His love story had already started. But in my hurry to catch the moment when ‘love’ appeared on the scene, I missed the important plot: the high temperature and his bedridden, helpless body, which sparked off a chain of events that transformed his life forever.

One morning, as Ali lay in bed feeling weak as the high fever continued, Begum, his future wife, visited him on her way to school. According to Ali, the doctor had visited him that morning and instructed the old lady to wash his body. As the housekeeper wiped his body, Begum also started to help out. Along with the housekeeper, she wiped his body and applied oil. ‘Like this,’ he slowly picked up an imaginary bottle from the floor and poured the imaginary oil on his palm, and described how she rubbed oil on his feet and his back. But the exchange between them was not a romantic conversation. ‘I reminded her to go to school. She responded that she was already late for school. Then I asked her to go back home, and she said it was late to go home,’ Ali said. Begum’s father worked as a pharmacist inside a tea plantation outside the foothill town. When he learned that his daughter had not returned from school and was in Ali’s house, he went to the police station and filed a complaint. The Officer in Charge (OC) came to Ali’s residence to arrest him for kidnapping Begum.

‘How can I elope with the girl? I have been bedridden with high fever,’ Ali informed the OC from the police station. He explained that Begum came to his house voluntarily, but there was a long session of interrogation. When the OC questioned Begum whether Ali touched her inappropriately she said no. Her father was also there to attack Ali. There were verbal exchanges between them. Ali began to interrogate Begum in front of her father to prove his innocence. Ali narrated the conversation as it unfolded at the tense moment. He said, ‘I questioned her why she came to see me? There were so many girls in the town and nobody came, except her. I repeatedly asked her why did you come to see me? Why did you come to see me? And she said, “I love you,” in English.’

Ali paused and looked at me. Then he brought his head forward as though whispering a secret and repeated, ‘She said I love you.’ For Ali, the ‘I love you’ in English conveyed with clarity what it wished to convey. It was a statement from which he could not turn back. ‘I told her if I wanted to get married I would have already been married. I have plans to go to London and settle down. My cousin was in London and he told me to join him there,’ Ali said. But now the entire town knew what she had said to him in front of the OC and her father, so no man would come and ask for her hand. Ali asked for her hand in marriage and she became his wife.

Ali’s life story is not so much about how a foreign language, English, captured the meaning of a definitive relation at a particular moment. Instead, what is significant about this story is how the foreign language is connected to a larger history and economy of colonialism in the foothills. The arrival of foreign rulers, the British administration, and their language in the foothills managed to convince some people like Ali that the British rule and way of life and language were superior. As a young tailor, Ali was commissioned by the tea companies around the foothill town to stitch the nurses’ uniforms, the planter club’s curtains, the planter family’s suits and dresses. He spoke about their generosity and his fascination with their lives inside the tea estates. Ali described how a planter’s wife one day gave him a fish from her pond and they became friendly. She not only gave business to Ali by commissioning him to stitch several items for her household, but also gave him the idea to migrate to London and open a tailor shop.

English was more than a language; it was a metaphor, which captured Ali’s infinite dreams and longings. It offered the clear boundary between the rulers and its subjects, and the distinction between a provincial language of morum and the global language of love. It was both the language of hope and hopelessness that captured his world. His loneliness as he lay in bed unwell, his insecurities growing up as an orphan, his admiration for the life of the colonial tea planters and the restlessness and alienation he felt in the foothill town after his uncle passed away and left him alone.

Begum’s declaration in English, ‘I love you’ transformed Ali’s life. Far from migrating to London, Ali never even visited the city. He never saw his cousins who migrated to London again. As he searched for more economic avenues to support his family, he sold off his tailoring shop and never stitched clothes again. He entered the coal trade and expanded his business and invested in the timber business, eventually becoming an influential member in the community. He established the first mosque in the town. Yet, he continued to see his life
as an incomplete journey. He reflected on his life in the foothill town and said, 'I never thought I would live here till the end of my life.' His reflections about life and love were intertwined with a sense of nostalgia about Begum, the English planters who were kind to him, the grand city of London and the unpredictable location he found himself in towards the end of his life. Not in London, where he had desired to settle down; not with Begum who made him stay back in the foothills and no longer a tailor. Alone and lonely once again in the foothill town, Ali continued to wonder how he stuck around the place he was so prepared to leave behind during his youth.

It was time for his afternoon nap. I looked at the watch and realized that Ali and I had been chatting for several hours. As he concluded his life story, he used the word morom to express his feelings for his wife. Although Ali's life was transformed with a declaration of love in a foreign language, toward the end of his life, he described the feelings for his wife as morom. His life with Begum was rooted in multiple relations they forged together – lover, wife, friend, companion, mother of their children and grandmother to their grandchildren. He had to live a lifetime to grasp the iterations of morom.

Conclusion

My aim was not to define love, or present the relations between different kinds of love. Instead, I investigated how the language of love played an important role in shaping the collective consciousness and practices of residents in the foothills. Morom or iterations of affection, is an important analytical tool to understand how the social worlds of love, governance and sovereignty are entangled. The skilled use of repetitions, monologues and verbal lists of historical and personal events characterized many interviews and conversations on morom I noted down in the foothills. Taken as 'conditions' of the foothill society, narratives of intimacies, affection and marriages constituted an important political and moral framework of the place. Regardless of whether Lulu's inter-ethnic marriage was condemned by the moral community or Molong Ali's desire to escape the foothills remained unfulfilled, both these accounts embraced the narratives of sacrifices, suffering and devotion. They informed us how people invoked the language of love to assert notions of purity, order and meanings in the foothills.

Narratives of inclusion and exclusion were established on a historical and cultural understanding of territoriality and power. Both Lulu and Molong Ali's accounts spanned a time frame from the colonial plantations in the nineteenth century all the way to the prevailing conditions of locating territoriality on the bodies of ethnic groups in Nagaland and Assam. The ethnographic lives showed us how global projects such as colonialism, extractive economic regimes, and grand projects of homelands shape and radically transform people's lives in what is perceived as remote and marginal places. In Lulu's case, the brand of nationalist aspirations, the pronunciation of the boundaries between the self and other, the Assamese (in the plains of Assam) and Naga (in the hills of Nagaland) became analogies about good and evil. These two groups became categorical opposites that not only constituted the notion about who the enemy was (each projected 'evil' on the other), but also encapsulated moral qualities such as beauty, primitiveness and danger. While in Molong Ali's story, it was about dreams, desires and the attractions of the foreign that captured his longings. An unfamiliar woman, a tender and devotional gesticulation, an 'I love you' in English that became an enduring expression of hope. For Ali it was an awkward intimacy he encountered in the foothills and the union that followed, which developed into a lifelong quest to unravel the meaning and magnitude of tenderness and affection.

By presenting an ethnographic insight about morom, I elaborated how discourses around intimacy and love helps us to understand imaginations and practices about social and moral boundaries. I especially paid attention to intimate everyday relations and practices of affection, and how they became the basis to determine the status of subjects in societies. Iterations of morom in the foothills, as I described in this chapter, emerged as a set of everyday relations marked by scars and bruises on the injured bodies and awkward intimacies and unions. It was these moments that connected the political identities and relations with the deep historical and political processes in the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland.

Endnotes

1. To a large extent, states are responsible for the forms in which the politics of recognition and claims for territorial homelands emerge and are articulated. Povinelli refers to the distinction between 'us' (the state and its perfect citizens) and 'them' (the aboriginals, indigenous groups, tribes and all the other categories) as a 'the politics of repugnancy' (Povinelli, 2002: 176). Yet, an increasing number of contestations over land rights and claims for recognizing spatial identity generally emerge from contestations over colonial demarcations, postcolonial territorial modifications, regional border disputes and multiple claims about homelands. These demands are closely linked to the politics of governance and the manner in
which people understand and negotiate with the state. Adopting spatial practices and demarcations as naturalized categories reinforces state practices and the spatial order, which reproduce forms of inequality and oppression (Cohn, 2004; Ferguson, 2006; Spivak, 1999; van Schendel, 2002).

2. The idea of right and justice in closed, kin-based communities, where identity is an important political marker, is exclusionary. Rights and justice, in such contexts, are only for a few in the particular group and in many cases women are excluded from rights such as inheritance, political participation and child custody rights (in cases of divorce and separation). Lulu was neither pure in the ethnic test and nor was she able to access the resources through which other women broke or challenged the concept of purity.


References


