



## Fractured Identities and Quest for Self in Suresh Chakravarty's Short Stories

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### Abstract

The search for identity is the cornerstone of modern literature and it emerges as a major concern not only in the mainstream Indian literature but also in the Northeast literature. Another aspect of Northeast literature is the search for roots and it becomes an overriding concern in the Northeast literature of postcolonial India.

Northeast, still suffering from colonial hangover and ethnicity crisis, has always been swamped by the mainstream Indian politics and governance. This political dominance has forced the Northeast writers to explore their distinctive identity and give shape in their writing.

Suresh Chakravarty delves deep into the hearts of Northeast people and digs out some of the most intensive crises of modern times and thus constructs each of his short stories depicting specific human sufferings and problems. He shows how the people of modern Northeast society are struggling with their dismantled identities fractured by the colonial legacy and mainstream political domination and how they are searching for their distinctive identities. The present essay discusses the above-mentioned concerns and explores how the writer successfully cultivates some of the most valid issues of modern Northeast people.

**Keywords:** identity, modern, political dominance, Northeast, colonial legacy.

The quest for order and identity is remarkable in the writings of Suresh Chakravarty. Though he is not the first to deal with the crisis of identity, yet he is quite unique in his writing in several ways. Many postcolonial writers have explicitly explored the theme of the individual's predicament in the form identity crisis. Chakravarty's short stories witness the experience of a minority culture adapting to a mainstream society, the changing value systems. The theme of identity crisis runs in almost all of his short stories.

'Identity' simply means the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. Identity is what a person is and always has been. It is also a mark of individualism and identity. It assures one's life and career in the face of overwhelming odds. A crisis in one's identity arises when one is unstable and unbalanced in one's self and in relation to his / her own surroundings. The Webster's Dictionary defines identity crisis as a

*Psychological confusion and maladjustment that arises especially in adolescents when unable to alter psychological identification because of conflicting demands and pressures. (563)*

“Debabroto Bhishmo Nohol” is a story by Suresh Chakravarty that deals with the “Psychological confusion and maladjustment” by drawing heavily upon mythical characters and episodes. The link between mythical and real character sought to be negotiated by the first person narrator’s behaviour and conduct of life. Just like Debabrata, the son of Ganges promised to his father Shantanu that he would never become king, similarly the protagonist of the story sacrifices his own benefits for the wellbeing of others. However, he could not be transformed into the mythical character of Bhishma because of his human limitation. It is not an easy story to understand though apparently the narrative appears to be plain enough. It demands repeated readings from the realisation to understand its multilayered subtle nuances.

When the story begins we find that the narrator has a dreadful dream at the dead of the night and when he comes to his senses from deep slumber he reaches reality. He sips a glass of water and comes back to his bed but cannot sleep. He saw his dead grandmother in his dream who has now become an old historical character. He does not want to disturb others by switching on the lights as he finds that other members of the family are sleeping. His beloved wife is sleeping near him, she could have been a college teacher, she had that capacity and qualification but the narrator did not give her the permission. His wife happens to be the eldest daughter-in-law of the family and the narrator has other six brother and sisters.

The narrator had to shoulder the responsibility of everyone as he looked after their career, education, job and marriage. He thinks he has turned to be Debabrata of Mahabharata and the only difference was that while the son of Ganga was unmarried, the narrator was married. Since last few days the narrator constantly wakes up mid night after seeing bizarre dreams. He philosophically muses over the fact that while a teacher teaches first and then takes exam but life

takes exam first and then teaches lessons. The narrator confesses that he could not learn lessons from history and he also tells that Bhishmo is his favourite character, his idol. But he could not accept Bhishma's idol, Karna. He did everything to his brothers and sisters and made stand on their feet. His wife has also sacrificed her wishes for the well fare of others.

The narrator and his wife only went to Shillong for one night after their marriage and his wife never asked him to take her to somewhere again. The protagonist has always sacrificed his own happiness for others since his childhood. He cites a few examples where he was the catalyst of success. After his brothers and sisters stood on their own feet they forgot the narrator's contribution in their lives. On each occasion he is approached by his parents and is asked by them to help others which he has always done. After many years his wife becomes vocal and tried to alert her husband to stop providing physical help and financial help to other. The narrator gradually comes to know about his parents' selfishness and he remembers how many times he has helped them through everything. Whenever the narrator's father is put in crisis he rushes to help him. If his father needs medicine the narrator provides it as though only he is bound to discharge his filial responsibility. On the occasion of his youngest sister's marriage he has to offer all the gold ornaments. The narrator takes everything seriously and that is why he is dignified and can be trusted.

The author again refers to the mythical figures as the narrator says that he never wanted to become Bhishmo, even the son of Ganga himself never thought that he would ever become Bhishmo. The transformation from Debabrototo to Bhishmo is a planned phenomenon. Again the narrator comes to the present as he informs the reader his daughter's result is not upto the mark. His wife accused him that if he would have cared a bit about their own daughter, keeping aside the responsibility of the other then they would have been in a better position now. The mythical figure of Bhishmo could die according to his wish but the narrator cannot do so as his family members would be crushed by life if he commits

suicide. Now a day the narrator does not want to go for morning walk and one day when his father requests him over the telephone to take care of his son in law who is ill and is admitted in a hospital, the narrator makes an outburst and reminds his father that he is a fifty years old person and he can no longer help them. His wife Swagata was standing near him and she switched off her husband's mobile before he turned out to be Bhishmo. Chakravarty writes about the disintegrating influence of religion and myth on an individual. He conveys the experience of a transplanted Indian whose identity is surrounded by confusion.

In "Antarnad", Chakravarty portrays the lost, rootless, homeless and alienated individual. His characters are divided people, they are the people with a receding past and an anguished Northeast presence. The cultural clash, the clash between the new and the old, past and present, tradition and modernity and the clash between an individual's aspirations and environments, between an important island and a world of opportunities lead to the identity crisis. It is a multi-layered story where the protagonist Avagya Das finds himself trapped into the workings of his destiny. Sometimes human beings can only act, the outcome of their decisions may be good or bad but there is no escape possible as long as one lives in this world. The story brings to light the trauma of the protagonist who has committed a blunder by going to help a female friend of his wife. The story is divided into different segments and employs a flashback technique, the narrative is the third person omniscient one.

It is a story about one man's pain and suffering and the ultimate disgrace and helplessness. As the story begins we find the protagonist sitting near the river and he is so engrossed that many poetic descriptions are provided by the author. As he looks at the river Avagya Das expresses a sigh as the once-powerful river has now aged and has become bankrupt like him. After a long time Das has come to visit his maternal uncle and when evening descends he decides to go back to the house. His uncle has got a habit of helping others- he would go to the market and would purchase food items with an exorbitant rate while he can get the same items by sitting at

home in half the price. Both the protagonist and his uncle happen to be the people who help others without any self-interest. The story then turns into a different episode where we find that Das is talking with his wife. They are discussing the death of Rumi's husband Mriganka and Rumi is a longtime friend of Das's wife.

The protagonist accuses his wife of being self as she only thinks about her wellbeing. The protagonist confesses that his outlook and thinking do not match with his wife Anushikha's thinking. After the post-mortem of Mriganka's body who died in a car accident, Rumi was bound or rather forced to live along with her two daughters. All her near and dear ones abandoned her and Rumi now needs help and support from her friends. The protagonist cannot convince his wife that Rumi needs help but she does not seem to care. Gradually through the sympathy and helping hand of the small town Mriganka's initial official matter was almost settled. But the problem that sprang up was related to the accident as a case was filed and this frightened Rumi. Rumi had to go to Guwahati and she was a woman of more than thirty years, gradually Das also get involved into the matter. The money that Rumi was supposed to get involved lots of law related matter and Das would never have known such intricacies if he would not have been involved in this matter. The protagonist was fed up, became angry, lost his patience, became angrier when he often missed the last bus that goes to his town, the situation worsens when Rumi accompanies him, he suffers for because of her, they change one vehicle after another, reaches home at midnight, finding no other alternative the protagonist express his anger to his wife. When Rumi gets the money, she brought sweets to Das's home and when rejoiced over the fact that he would be free from now then Rumi tells him she always wants him. One day Rumi told das that since she already has a job, that is why she could not claim her dead husband's pension. Das said that the children can get and Rumi asked Das to go to the clerk and investigate the matter.

Accordingly he went to the clerk who told him that if the mother marries for the second time, then only her offspring would get the pension. Das tries to convince Rumi that these are difficult matters

and since she herself has a job, there would be no freedom. But Rumi says that if one of her daughters can have a fixed amount then her worries would be over. Suddenly there was a bolt from the blue as Ruma gave the proposal of marriage to das. Das is surprised beyond measure and tells that he cannot be so great as he has got a happy family. Rumi said that only two of them would share the secret and they should care about society.

The episode changes again and the protagonist was found with his uncle. When being asked where the protagonist went, he replied that he went to see the river. His uncle said that after leisure they can talk but das was almost ready to go. Then his uncle asked him the reason for his arrival to which das replied that he came to see his elder. However the uncle noticed that his nephew was not looking well and after forcing him the truth came out. Das told his uncle that he has married for the second time to which his uncle rewarded by telling that he was not a characterless man. The uncle then ruminates over the death of das' mother and how after all the ceremonies he carried his nephew to home on his shoulder. After the death of Das's mother his father married again and das explained everything to his uncle. The narrator informs his uncle how due to guilt feeling he has told everything to his wife who cannot tolerate even Das's shadow now. Then uncle said that das should live with Rumi and the protagonist informed that Rumi has also changed her stance as she is not ready to live with him now considering the future of her children. The narrator now tells that he has on another way rather than committing suicide to which his uncle responds with both anger and sympathy. The uncle said that there is nobody in this world to shed tears for Das and as he said this his childless uncle started shedding tears for Das. The narrator got hold of the neck of his uncle like a child of three years his scream reverberated through coconut tree and reached the river. Jhumpa Lahiri expresses about the question of identity:

*...the problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning...Understanding*

*of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. (2)*

Astoron is a clinical description of a bereaved woman's loneliness and her gradual degradation to a state of mental depression because of lack of companion. Man cannot live by bread alone, human beings always crave for accompaniment and that is why the institution of family has been created on earth. It is a heart-rending and social-wrenching story of a woman who has lost her husband and father. Her only son is well settled in life, wants to take her along with him, she refuses, he does not force her and leaves for abroad where he works. The story is narrated from the perspective of a first-person narrator, a woman who leads a solitary life full of boredom. The story reminds one of the absurdity of human life on earth and one can also remember the line of Gaiting For Godot "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful". During their youth, her husband Rupam chooses a plot of land for them and they made a nice home with the money they had saved. But Rupam suddenly died one day and after the rituals were over the narrator's son wanted to take her with him but she refused and her son did not insist. She said that the memory of last twenty-five years was enough to make her stay alone in the house. She remembers the older days when Rupam used to pick her up from the Office gate where she worked.

After the death of the Rupam the narrator went to Guwahati and her father did not let her go to Jorhat again and he even managed her transfer. One day she sold the home that was so fondly built by Rupam and she got lots of money in the form of Rupam's gratuity, provident fund, his sudden death and also the amount she got by selling the home. Her father insisted that she must purchase a home for herself at the new place even though she felt lonely. After that she really purchased a wide and well maid flat and her father came



to live with her permanently. Her father started taking care of her in a way she suggested as though she was a kid. Her father's presence eradicated her loneliness to a considerable extent, she felt as though she has returned to the heavenly days of her childhood.

When she was a child, she used to sleep with her father who was a judge in court. Her father used to tell them about the many criminals who had been punished because of his verdict. She suffered from paranoia that her father would be murdered by some criminal one day. When her father used to fondle her hair in her childhood she fell into sleep. She was always overprotected by her father and even her husband Rupam did the same in absence of Rupam, she again wanted to be protected by her father which eventually became a reality. But one day her father was hospitalised and during these days she took all care of her ill father as though other siblings were none. Now she lives with a maid servant, her father is dead.

She thinks that if God is really looking after the wellbeing of humans on earth then why does that omnipotent entity bring curse to his devotees. Sometimes she feels like rebelling and even her son tells her point-blank that if she re-marries he would not become unhappy nor he would object to it. The narrator could not even see her husband when he was dying and her father surrendered against age. She cannot find any dependable person whom she can trust but there is none like that. In moments like these, she eyes her various long sarees, brings more bottles of finale than is required, looks at the passing train from the backyard of her home, looks at the night train. All these suggest obliquely that she might commit suicide but she resists the idea. As the mobile rings, she looks at the familiar number and responds immediately and it is her son on the other side of the phone. He tells her mother "I felt like knowing what the little child is doing at this moment. Have you taken your dinner"? and these words from Rupam's son bring tears to her eyes like the rain during the monsoon. This is an extremely sensitive story that shows pathos and the frightening aspect of alienation. The story can be interpreted from the point of philosophical existentialism.

Gandhari is a rich text that brings to light the pathetic plight of an almost naked girl who is running through the city and she is being chased by a group of the wild man. But the most surprising aspect is that nobody in this great city is coming out of the home and trying to protect her. In this story the Chakravarty has revealed how middle-class human beings behave like Voyeur.

The story refers again to one of the greatest characters of the Indian epic Mahabharata named Gandhari who willingly lived a blind life in order to sympathise with her husband, the king of the Hastinapur, named Dhritarashtra. As the story begins we find that an almost naked girl is chased away by a group of wild hooligans and everybody's she called is shutting his or her Window's to avoid eye contact. At the very outset the author describes the body of the unfortunate girl in such a way that arouses sexual feeling in the mind of the readers.

But the author does this in order to suggest the helplessness of the running girl, he does not write any pornography. Rather he provides a detailed sexual description in order to suggest the voyeuristic tendency of the middle class people. Suddenly someone threw a piece of cloth for the semi naked girl and she was still short of enough to prevent her bare body. In the next episode we find two characters named Sadhana and Hamid helping each other out of respect and affection respectively. Sadhana's day begins with an active session till he prepares breakfast for her daughter and husband and sees them go to school and office respectively. Hamid sometimes wants to present a piece of chadar or shawl to Sadhna but she refuses by telling that he should sell it at an appropriate price in the market. Hamid works in an office as a fourth-grade employee and finds it difficult to make both ends meet and this is the reason why he sells cloth after the end of the office hours.

Hamid draws the attention of Sadhna regarding the incident of the girl and after switching on the television. She sees the heart rending and frightening footage prepared by the media. The author lashes out at the social media which wants only sensationalism and only runs after money without any human concern. The male gaze and

female body that feminism emphasis upon is brought to the fore here. Sadhna feels uncomfortable and switches off the television. Arunav (her husband) and Atri (her daughter) arrived on the appropriate time to their home and in the night Sadhna cannot sleep. When on the next day Sadhna sees the footage again she feels like she becoming the mythical Gandhari who willingly chose blindness for her. As she read the newspaper and find how the media people exaggerate everything for heavy sail and profit. Suddenly she feels that her Atri is also running in an almost naked manner through the streets of the city followed by a group of civilized men who are looking at her bare body and saving the pictures in their mobile and camera screen. The story ends here where the author shows how beastly human beings can be and in this context, one can remember William Golding's comment "As bee produces honey so man produces evil".

Even after going to America Himadri did not forget his beloved's birthday as once he called his wife and mother in law to Calcutta to celebrate his wife's birthday and he returned by the early morning's flight to America. The protagonist is gradually reminded of many episodes in her life as she had lost her memory after death of Himadri and their only son Rahul in a car accident on way from Dibrugarh to Guwahati. The female narrator earlier used to boast of her strong memory, she regarded herself with a gifted memory as could exactly recollect every small detail of her life. But now her parents are with him as shadows and they remind her of her loneliness. The doctor tried to bring back her memory but she was not cured and she also was not sure about her disease. She becomes exasperated and thinks how her parents have surrendered to God by clinging to their ultimate support and her future. The story end in a touching manner when the female protagonist is reminded of her birthday by her parents and the pain of the parents is optimum.

Gagori is a heart-rending story about an aged man's grief who has gradually lost the enthusiasm of life. As the story starts we are introduced to the principal protagonist of the story titled Agasta Chaudhary who is still sitting upon a chair placed in his broad

veranda. Unknowingly he crept into sleep and when suddenly woke up he saw that evening was descending upon the horizon. He came into consciousness when his stick (which he used as a support) fell on the ground making a sound and he picks up the stick from the ground. He also felt helpless as he thinks that he has grown old because of an untimely nap.

After sometime Chaudhary opens the gate of his house and stepped into the road. He is very depressed since the last few days, the reason of which is revealed by the third person omniscient narrator only towards the end of the story. Chaudhary still remembers that he suffered from similar helplessness a few years back when he and his wife Priyamvada were shocked by the sudden marriage of their only son Jon who was a doctor and who decided to remain in a different state after the marriage. The son did not back to his home, a fact which still depresses Chaudhary. He never was a miser regarding the education of his only son and two daughters. After that the Chaudhary couple pined their hope upon their daughter Panchami and Priyamvada decided that the ornaments which were supposed to be given to their daughter-in-law would now be given to their daughter Panchami when her marriage would be fixed. There is a saying that man proposes and God disposes of but the irony of the Choudhary couple's fate was that Panchami too betrayed them and went away with a different person chosen by herself without thinking about the shock that such decision would give to her parents. After that Chaudhary became very guarded regarding their third and younger daughter. She was admitted in a local college and after doing result from the university she herself became a permanent lecturer in that college. After all these flashback Chaudhary comes back to the present and he sits on a Calvert to take a rest and he also wanted to chalk out a plan for the future. The letter given by Abhishek has created a new world in his heart and he never thought that such disturbances could ever be created. While going to the University the youngest daughter vowed that she would return to her home after the end of her education and she kept her promise. One day Abhishek proposed to her for marriage but

Bandana said that for that he would have to meet his would-be father-in-law. But after knowing the details of the Chaudhary family, Abhishek rejected Bandana. Chaudhary again comes out of the past memory and starts moving towards his home. After reaching home, Chaudhary was served a cup of tea by Bandana would then sought permission of asking a question to her father. Chaudhary said yes in fear and Bandana asked her father, "even if I do not get married, wont you allow me to live in this house". This is a very poignant story that brings to the light the theme of filial obligation and old age suffering.

To conclude, though identity crisis is a typical theme in Indian or Northeast literature, it has been dealt with new dimension in postmodern context. Earlier it was in context with social, political, and economic background. In the postmodern context it has become more complex. In postmodern context it is in the case of individual being struggling in his own world to find out space and scope.

Suresh Chakravarty deals with the theme of identity crisis in the postmodern context. All characters from his short stories are on interior journey. They struggle to find out new patterns of life or new orders of life. They attempt for the self-assertion. They get swayed by the problems of loneliness, pessimism. Their conflict arises from self's craving for fulfillment. Though they are self-conscious about the reality around them, they carry a sense of loneliness within them.

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