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Somnath Batabyal's Red River: The Issue of Immigration through the Eyes of the Immigrant

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Abstract

Somnath Batabyal's Red River (2024) is a poignant exploration of immigration, identity, and belonging set against the turbulent socio-political landscape of Assam in the 190s and 1990s. This research article examines how Batabyal's novel portrays the immigrant experience, particularly that of Bengali Hindus, through the lens of personal and collective trauma, xenophobia, and the quest for belonging. By weaving together fictional narratives with historical realities, Batabyal captures the complexities of Assam's immigration debates, spotlighting the human cost of separatist movements and anti-immigrant sentiments. Drawing on scholarly reviews, historical analyses, and postcolonial theories, this article analyzes the novel's depiction of immigrants as both victims and agents within Assam's contested socio-political space. It argues that Red River challenges monolithic narratives of Assamese identity by foregrounding the immigrant's perspective, thus contributing to a nuanced understanding of migration and its intersections with nationalism, ethnicity, and belonging.

Keywords: Immigration, Identity, Assam, Postcoloniality.

Introduction

Somnath Batabyal's Red River (2024) emerges as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian literature, offering a layered exploration of immigration in Assam during the volatile decades of the 190s and 1990s. Set against the backdrop of the Assam Movement and the rise of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the novel delves into the

lives of three families, focusing particularly on the experiences of Bengali Hindu immigrants. Batabyal, an anthropologist and ethnographer, draws on his personal history as the son of a Bangladeshi refugee to craft a narrative that is both deeply personal and politically resonant (Batabyal, "Author Somnath Batabyal"). This article analyzes how Red River illuminates the immigrant experience, emphasizing the

interplay of identity, displacement, and resilience in a region marked by ethnic tensions and nationalist fervor.

The novel's significance lies in its ability to humanize the often-abstracted "outsider question" in Assam, presenting immigrants not as mere statistics but as individuals with complex histories and aspirations. Through characters like Lucky Ganguly, a Cambridge-educated refugee, Batabyal explores the emotional and social toll of being labeled a "foreigner" in a land one seeks to call home. The narrative's historical grounding, combined with its empathetic portrayal of marginalized voices, aligns with postcolonial theories of identity and belonging, particularly those of Homi K. Bhabha and Partha Chatterjee, who examine the fractures within national identities (Bhabha 9; Chatterjee 27). By drawing on scholarly reviews, historical accounts, and theoretical frameworks, this article argues that *Red River* challenges the binary of "indigenous" versus "outsider," offering a nuanced perspective on Assam's immigration debates. It examines the novel's narrative strategies, thematic depth, and socio-political commentary, situating it within broader discourses on migration, nationalism, and postcoloniality. The analysis also engages with critiques of the novel, such as its occasionally melodramatic tone, to provide a balanced assessment of its contributions to literary and historical discourses (Imphal Reviews).

Historical Context: Immigration and Identity in Assam

The immigration question in Assam is rooted in a complex interplay of colonial policies, postcolonial anxieties, and ethnic identity politics. During the British colonial period, large-scale migration from Bengal to Assam was encouraged to meet labor demands in tea plantations and administrative roles, significantly altering the region's demographic landscape (Baruah 45). The 174 designation of Assam as a separate province intensified these

migrations, as Bengali-speaking clerks and laborers became integral to the colonial economy (Goswami 33). However, these demographic shifts sowed seeds of resentment among the Assamese, who perceived their cultural and economic dominance as under threat. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War further complicated this dynamic, as waves of Bengali Hindu refugees entered Assam, fleeing persecution and seeking safety (Saikia 112). This influx fueled fears of "demographic invasion," a narrative that gained traction during the Assam Movement (1979-1995), led by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) (Hazarika 67).

The Assam Movement demanded the detection and deportation of "foreigners," a term often applied indiscriminately to Bengali-speaking communities, regardless of their legal status (Baruah 49). The movement's rhetoric of protecting Assamese identity culminated in violent episodes, such as the Nellie Massacre of 193, where thousands of Bengali Muslims were killed (Kimura 9). The rise of ULFA in the 190s escalated these tensions, with militant actions targeting perceived outsiders, particularly Bengalis (Frontline). Batabyal's *Red River* captures this turbulent period, focusing on the human cost of such conflicts through the experiences of characters like Lucky Ganguly, a Bengali refugee accused of being an illegal migrant (Mint). The novel also reflects the systemic violence of state mechanisms, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), which exacerbated insecurities for immigrant communities (Baruah 7). By grounding its narrative in this historical context, *Red River* illuminates the intersection of migration, nationalism, and identity, offering a critical perspective on Assam's "outsider question" and its enduring legacy (Scroll.in).

The Immigrant Perspective in *Red River*

Red River centers on the lives of three boys—Rizu, Samar, and Rana—whose friendships and families are shaped by Assam's turbulent history. The novel's immigrant

characters, particularly Samar's mother, Lucky Ganguly, embody the complexities of displacement and identity. Lucky, a Cambridge-educated Bangladeshi refugee, is a tragic figure who faces accusations of being an illegal migrant and a double agent, ultimately being deported back to Bangladesh (Mint). Her story highlights the precarious existence of Bengali Hindus in Assam, who are often labeled as "Bongals" (a derogatory term for Bengalis) and subjected to systemic discrimination (Imphal Reviews).

Batabyal's narrative strategy is to interweave personal and political tragedies, showing how immigration policies and nationalist fervor disrupt individual lives. For instance, Lucky's loss of her infant daughter, Tina, at New Jalpaiguri station underscores the personal cost of displacement, while her deportation reflects the state's punitive approach to suspected foreigners (Mint). This dual focus on personal and political dimensions aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely," where the home becomes a site of alienation for the displaced (Bhabha 9). Lucky's struggle to belong in Assam, despite her education and contributions, illustrates this unhomeliness, as she is perpetually marked as an outsider.

The novel also explores the intergenerational impact of immigration. Samar, Lucky's son, grows up in the shadow of his mother's refugee status, navigating his own identity as an Assamese-Bengali hybrid. His friendship with Rizu, an Assamese boy, and Rana, a newcomer, reflects the layered nature of identity affiliations in Assam, where ethnic loyalties coexist with personal bonds (Imphal Reviews). Batabyal uses these relationships to comment on xenophobia, suggesting that it stems not from individual animosity but from socio-economic anxieties, such as poverty and unemployment (Frontline). This perspective aligns with Amalendu Guha's analysis of Assam's immigration conflicts, which attributes anti-immigrant sentiments to economic

competition rather than cultural differences alone (Guha 9).

Narrative Techniques and Thematic Depth

Batabyal's anthropological background informs his narrative approach, blending ethnographic detail with fictional storytelling. The novel opens with a vivid scene of a television set arriving in Gopalpur Rajbari, a village in Assam, on the eve of the 193 Cricket World Cup final (Scroll.in). This moment serves as a narrative anchor, grounding the story in a specific historical and cultural context while symbolizing the intersection of global and local identities. The communal viewing of the cricket match reflects a fleeting sense of unity, which is soon fractured by the rise of anti-immigrant violence.

The novel's structure, spanning Assam, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and London, mirrors the diasporic journeys of its characters. Batabyal employs multiple perspectives and non-linear storytelling to capture the fragmented nature of immigrant lives. For instance, Samar's family's escape to Bengal following a riot illustrates the physical and emotional dislocation of immigrants (Imphal Reviews). Scholarly reviews praise Batabyal's "gift of characterisation and storytelling" for bringing freshness to the well-trodden theme of Assam's separatist movements (Mint). Nilanjana Roy describes the novel as "heartbreaking" and "unforgettable," highlighting its ability to make characters "real" to readers (Amazon.in).

Thematically, *Red River* engages with the politics of belonging, questioning who has the right to claim Assam's resources and identity (Scroll.in). Batabyal challenges the binary of "indigenous" versus "outsider" by portraying immigrants as active agents who shape Assam's cultural and social fabric. For example, Lucky's marriage to Amol Dutta, an Assamese singer, symbolizes a potential bridge between communities, though it is ultimately thwarted by systemic prejudice (Scroll.in). This aligns with Partha Chatterjee's argument that

nationalist movements in postcolonial states often construct rigid boundaries of identity to assert dominance, marginalizing minority groups (Chatterjee 27).

Scholarly Reception and Critical Analysis

Scholarly reviews of *Red River* commend its historical depth and nuanced portrayal of immigration. Olivia Fraser describes it as a “moving, compelling masterpiece” that ranks among the best political novels in English from the region (Amazon.in). However, some critics note flaws, such as the novel’s rushed conclusion, which leaves certain plotlines unresolved (Amazon.in). The Imphal Review of Arts and Politics praises the first part of the novel for its intimate portrayal of Assam’s troubled 1990s but critiques the second part for descending into melodrama due to “improbable coincidences” (Imphal Reviews). Despite these critiques, the novel’s ability to weave personal narratives with historical events is widely appreciated.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Red River* can be read as a critique of the nation-state’s exclusionary practices. Drawing on Edward Said’s concept of “imagined communities,” the novel exposes how Assam’s nationalist movements construct a homogenous Assamese identity that excludes immigrants (Said 15). Batabyal’s portrayal of Lucky as a refugee who is both educated and marginalized challenges stereotypes of immigrants as mere economic burdens. This resonates with Yasmin Saikia’s work on the Bangladesh Liberation War, which highlights the enduring trauma of displaced communities (Saikia 134).

The novel also engages with the systemic violence of state mechanisms, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), which Batabyal critiques through an episode where over 20 innocent youths are killed by the army (Deccan Herald). This incident underscores the state’s complicity in exacerbating immigrant insecurities, aligning with Sanjib Baruah’s argument that AFSPA has

entrenched a culture of impunity in Assam (Baruah 7).

The Immigrant as Agent and Victim

In *Red River*, immigrants are portrayed as both victims of systemic violence and agents of resilience, navigating a landscape fraught with prejudice and insecurity. Lucky Ganguly epitomizes this duality: her Cambridge education and marriage to an Assamese singer reflect her agency, yet her deportation and the loss of her daughter highlight her vulnerability to state and societal forces (Mint). Her character challenges the stereotype of the passive immigrant, aligning with Aihwa Ong’s concept of “flexible citizenship,” where migrants actively negotiate multiple identities to survive in hostile environments (Ong 6). Lucky’s attempts to integrate into Assamese society through education and cultural contributions are thwarted by xenophobic policies, illustrating the systemic barriers faced by immigrants.

Samar, Lucky’s son, further embodies this dual role. His journey from Assam to Bengal and beyond reflects a quest for agency amidst inherited trauma. His hybrid identity as an Assamese-Bengali youth allows Batabyal to explore the intergenerational impact of migration, where second-generation immigrants grapple with fractured senses of belonging (Imphal Reviews). This resonates with Stuart Hall’s theory of diasporic identity, which posits that migrant identities are shaped by both displacement and the active reconstruction of self (Hall 225). Samar’s friendships with Rizu and Rana highlight the potential for cross-ethnic solidarity, yet their eventual fragmentation underscores the pervasive impact of nationalist rhetoric.

The novel also addresses the gendered dimensions of immigration. Lucky’s experiences as a woman—facing accusations of inciting rebellion and enduring personal loss—highlight the intersection of gender and migrant identity. Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that women migrants face

compounded vulnerabilities due to patriarchal structures (Mohanty 23). Batabyal's portrayal of Lucky's struggles reflects this, as her intellectual agency is undermined by gendered and ethnic prejudices. Additionally, the novel critiques the role of state mechanisms like the Foreigners' Tribunals, which disproportionately target women and marginalized groups, as noted by historian Anupama Roy (Roy 145). By presenting immigrants as both agents and victims, Red River underscores their resilience while exposing the structural injustices they face.

Conclusion

Somnath Batabyal's Red River is a powerful literary intervention into the discourse on immigration in Assam, offering a nuanced portrayal of the immigrant experience through the lives of characters like Lucky Ganguly and Samar. By weaving personal narratives with the socio-political upheavals of the 190s and 1990s, the novel humanizes the "outsider question," challenging readers to reconsider notions of belonging and justice in a region marked by ethnic and nationalist tensions. Batabyal's anthropological insight and narrative skill illuminate the emotional and social toll of xenophobia, while his focus on immigrant agency disrupts monolithic narratives of victimhood. The novel's historical grounding, particularly its depiction of the Assam Movement and ULFA's militancy, provides a rich context for understanding the complexities of migration and identity (Baruah 45).

Despite critiques of its occasionally melodramatic tone and rushed conclusion (Imphal Reviews), Red River stands out for its empathetic portrayal of Bengali Hindus as both victims and agents within Assam's contested socio-political landscape. Its engagement with postcolonial theories, such as Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" and Chatterjee's critique of nationalist exclusion, enriches its commentary on the intersections of migration, ethnicity, and gender (Bhabha 9; Chatterjee 27). By

foregrounding the immigrant perspective, the novel contributes to a broader understanding of Assam's history and its relevance to contemporary debates on migration and citizenship, such as those surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) (Roy 150). Ultimately, Red River invites readers to reflect on the human cost of nationalist projects and the enduring resilience of those who navigate the margins of belonging, making it a vital text for scholars and readers alike.

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