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Research Paper

Symbolism and Autobiographical Memory: Navigating the Bengali Identity in Assam

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intricate relationship between symbolism, autobiographical memory, and cultural identity through the first-person narratives of two individuals: Tuchindrai Jayanta, a painter, and Dr. Timir, an academic, both from Guwahati, Assam. Utilizing theories of linguistic minoritization (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), colonizer's guilt (Nandy, 2000), and transgenerational trauma (Volkan, 2001), the study explores how personal histories, rooted in the complex socio-political landscape of post-partition India, manifest in artistic expression and cultural practices. Jayanta's art, characterized by symbols such as barbed wires, traditional cooking vessels, and running legs, reflects the experiences of displacement and cultural disavowal faced by the Bengali community in Assam. These symbols act as metaphors for the community's struggle against abjection (Kristeva, 1982) and their ongoing negotiation of identity in the face of exclusion. Dr. Timir's use of natural symbols, particularly trees and their roots, serves as a powerful metaphor for cultural identity and ancestral connection, illustrating the concept of third individuation (Akhtar, 1995). The paper also delves into the transgenerational transmission of trauma, highlighting how autobiographical memory shapes cultural practices, such as the conscious preservation of linguistic traditions, to recreate a sense of the lost homeland. This study underscores the significance of both art and everyday practices as mediums for preserving and communicating personal and cultural histories, offering insights into the interplay between memory, identity, and cultural expression as methods for psychoanalytic interpretation of the Bengali linguistic community in Assam.

Keywords: *Symbolism, Autobiographical Memory, Cultural Identity, Linguistic Minoritization, Transgenerational Trauma*

The experience of linguistic minoritization among Bengali speakers in Assam can be understood through the intersecting lenses of autobiographical memory and symbolism. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000) conceptualization of autobiographical memory as a repository of personal historical information provides insight into how linguistic minorities encode their experiences of cultural marginalization. These memories, ranging from broad life periods to specific instances of linguistic discrimination, become crystallized through symbolic representations that carry both personal and collective significance.

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In the context of Assam's complex sociolinguistic landscape, where Bengali Hindus constitute 20.9% of the state's population (Singh and Rajan, 2016), the demographic composition itself becomes symbolically charged. The Bengali population's historical trajectory - from settlers in the Barak Valley to later migrants in the Brahmaputra Valley region during the British Raj, Partition, and Bangladesh Liberation War (Thengal, 2020) - creates layers of symbolic meaning in their autobiographical narratives. Following Blum's (1978) framework of symbolic interpretation, these historical movements and settlements operate as symbols on multiple levels: they represent both physical displacement and psychological dislocation.

The theoretical framework of "linguicism" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017), which describes ideologies and structures legitimizing unequal power distribution based on language, can be better understood through this psychoanalytic lens. Personal memories and their symbolic representations reveal how these unequal power structures are internalized and transmitted across generations. This is particularly evident in how the Bengali community faces pressure to abandon their linguistic identity for assimilation while still facing exclusion, creating what Ashish Nandy (1983) describes as long-term anxieties and identity issues in his analysis of colonialism's psychological impact.

The settler colonial context of Assam, as defined by Veracini (2016), adds another layer to this symbolic interpretation. The British colonial establishment of tea plantations, involving land acquisition from indigenous communities and importation of indentured labor (Behal and Mohapatra, 1992; Sharma, 2011), creates a complex web of symbols that manifest in contemporary autobiographical narratives. These symbols might appear in various forms - from linguistic practices to cultural traditions - each carrying multiple stratified meanings that reflect both historical trauma and ongoing struggles for identity preservation.

When examining how Bengali speakers process and preserve their experiences of linguistic marginalization, their autobiographical memories often become encoded through specific symbolic forms that reflect both individual and collective experiences of exclusion. As Blum (1978) notes, while these symbols may acquire additional cultural and religious significance over time, they retain their primary symbolic representations of loss, displacement, and resistance. The internalized self-doubt and linguistic shame within Bengali families (Paul, 2019) often manifests through these symbolic representations, which can be understood as psychological responses to what Nettle and Romaine (2000) describe as the global pattern of pressure on minority languages from dominant ones.

This theoretical synthesis demonstrates how autobiographical memory and symbolism provide crucial tools for understanding the psychological dimensions of linguistic minoritization. Through this lens, we can better comprehend how individuals and communities process, preserve, and resist experiences of linguistic and cultural marginalization, while simultaneously navigating the complex demands of cultural preservation and social integration in contemporary Assam.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed the life story method through in-depth interviews conducted with two key participants in Guwahati, Assam, between May to July 2024: Tuchindrai Jayanta, a painter, and Dr. Timir, an academic. While the initial research design envisioned a broader sample, the study evolved to focus on these two rich case studies, allowing for deeper psychoanalytic interpretation and analysis. The interviews, conducted in Bengali and

Assamese languages emphasized empathic listening as outlined by Carl Rogers (1951). Both participants demonstrated extensive engagement with questions about their Bengali identity, providing detailed personal narratives that were particularly rich in symbolic content and autobiographical memories. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated to English. This focused approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how personal histories intersect with broader themes of linguistic minoritization, cultural identity, and transgenerational trauma.

The Abject Self and its despair

Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection is primarily based on a deep-seated feeling of repulsion that originates from threats to established social norms. This can be seen in the apartheid era, where non-white bodies were viewed as dangerous, repugnant, and menacing to white bodies (Bick, 2010; Hook, 2004). However, Kristeva (1982) expands the scope of abjection beyond mere visceral disgust, arguing that it also includes aspects that disturb identity and system order while disregarding borders, positions, and rules. The ambiguity inherent in the concept of abjection can be understood as encompassing practices and objects that challenge and disrupt one's conscious sense of self (Tyler, 2009). This indicates that rejection stems not only from physical revulsion but also from perceived threats to an established order posed by institutions, objects, or ideas (Jones et al., 2022).

A prime example of this can be observed in Assam's Bengali community. Their separate linguistic identity and perceived rootlessness disturb the Assamese identity, thus solidifying their status as abject. A similar case can be found in the German National Socialist discourse of the 1930s and 1940s when Jews and Roma were depicted as filthy rats associated with disease due to their rootlessness. (Jones et al., 2022)

Abjection manifests at both individual and group behavior levels as a socio-psychological process of producing "excluded" entities. Kristeva's understanding of abjection has origins in Freud's psychoanalytic theories (1989), which contend that the act of expelling the abject is essential for ego development. Additionally, instances of caste and racial oppression are often discussed within the context of abjection (Jones et al., 2022). To examine the concept of abjection more comprehensively, it must be acknowledged that it exists across temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions (Douglas, 1996). Kristeva's notion of abjection is derived from Douglas's understanding of spatial contamination and dirt. This notion posits that an object's "dirtiness" is context-dependent, as illustrated by the example of shoes being dirty when placed on a dining table (Douglas, 1966, 44-45). The mere thought of living near someone from a different ethnicity could bring forth the risk of various forms of contamination (Coetzee, 1991).

It is quite difficult to identify a clear-cut example of segregation as a regulation implemented by urban planners in Assam. Nevertheless, you can find certain cities, areas, and regions that house specific linguistic communities, like the Bengali speakers in Barak Valley.

Considering abjection as an ever-changing force, it fuels the perpetuation of race or ethnicity based poverty and upholds the power of those with privilege (Jones et al. 2019). Beyond this notion, abjection serves as a justification for particular biopolitical control measures aimed at 'cleansing' society (Duschinsky and Adey, 2014). As mentioned later, planning – which can be employed to reason out space – has the potential to be an extremely influential instrument for this brand of biopolitical control (Certomà, 2013).

Self and the Other as an extension of the Self

Frequently, a dissenting perspective emerges from individuals referred to as "natives" in opposition to the diaspora. Historically, the term native often signifies those who arrived on a land earlier than others. These natives argue that immigrants consume their resources and job opportunities. They are apprehensive and fearful of losing everything they possess to "the others." Natives dread the prospect of becoming "the other." The phenomenon of "othering" is an effort to dissociate oneself from undesirable aspects and attribute them to others (Rocha, 2012). In this particular context, othering might entail projecting these unwelcome or disowned traits onto different individuals or groups. Individuals may label certain attributes as "other" and assign them to external entities, thereby distancing themselves from those qualities. Through this process, a distinction is made between what is deemed "normal" or acceptable within oneself and what is considered "abnormal" or unacceptable in others. This projective mechanism enables people to reject specific components of their own psyche while maintaining a coherent self-image and redirecting undesired characteristics onto external targets.

The “other” is often undefined when it comes to Assam. While the Assamese community might point out the Bengali Hindus as the enemies, it’s the Bengali Muslims that are pointed out as the “other” by Bengali Hindus.

“But you see the biggest nuisance to the problem of culture and immigration are the Bengali Muslims right now. They are ready to give up on their language, which is our identity for the sake of acceptance which we (Bengali Hindus) cannot do right?” They don’t care about their loyalty to their culture.” states Jayanta, one of the interviewees.

*In the last two statements he again shifts his dialect to Miya, creole between dialects of Bangla originating in Bangladesh and Assamese. He punctuates the end of his monologue with “*I hope I don’t sound racist”.

The dialectic shifts between language is often unintentional but also deeply embedded in the psyche, almost as deep as a method actor would embody the character one is asked to play. The “other” shifts further away as more north-Indian communities settle in Assam and buy resources.

“You know I visited the Ambubachi Puja recently, I saw a bunch of North-Indians. I know it from their outfit and everything.” The Ambubachi is the yearly festival celebrated at Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati.” shares Jayanta as he tries to point out the new “Other”. He continues, “The entire place was filled with hums of *Jai Mata Di.* Where is even the Assamese or Bengali there?”

“Other” or the symbolic enemy in some cases, is often a construct that keeps shifting across, region, culture, space and time as human beings keep meandering their own positionality in the larger context to figure out the most non-vulnerable position.

One of the key features that I would like to identify is the perceptual reality vs. delusional reality (Figlio, 2018). A large percentage of communal and ethnic violence occurs based on intensification of delusional reality. If we go back to the definition of delusional difference as a “phantasy of a defining characteristic, which invents a grouping as essentially other” (Figlio, 2017; p. 146). Figlio (2017) writes – “A Jew then becomes essentially non-German on the basis of a set of characteristics that anyone could ‘see’, if they attended to them

carefully." In a similar parallel, the differences between the Assamese and Bengalis. in Assam are at some level delusional difference at least in the current context. These delusional realities bring us to Figlio's (2017) concept of narcissism of small differences. On establishing our context of ethnic violence, we can relook at this statement "Sameness, not differences, is the target of hatred." (Figlio, 2017; p.146) Centuries of cohabitation has led to inter-community marriages further blurring out the physical & genetic differences. While the differences between Jew and Gentiles were created based on physical traits which were marked as weaker physical traits in comparison, the physical differences between an Assamese and a Bengali at this point in the history is contestable with centuries of inter-community marriages.

Adapting a new language as Third Individuation

Frantz Fanon discussed the psychological implications of language adaptation in his book "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952). Fanon explored the notion of Black individuals adopting the language and culture of the colonizer, often referred to as "speaking pidgin" or "speaking like a White man," in a quest to achieve a sense of equality and acceptance. He argued that such linguistic and cultural assimilation can be seen as a coping mechanism for marginalized individuals to gain recognition and overcome the pervasive racism and discrimination they face. However, Fanon also highlighted the alienation and internal conflict that can arise from this process, as individuals may feel disconnected from their authentic identity. This perspective can be compared to the experiences of Bengalis in Assam, where language adaptation has been observed among some members of the community. As a linguistic minority, some Bengalis may choose to learn and adopt the Assamese language as a means to navigate social and economic opportunities and to establish a sense of belonging within the broader Assamese society. Yet, this adaptation may also raise questions about cultural preservation and the negotiation of one's identity.

Having said that there is delineation based on linguistic identity in Assam, one of the aims of this research would be how these shifts between speaking two languages - a mother-tongue and another by the necessity of acculturation and assimilation, learning and re-learning the adopted language and a fear of not capable of speaking the purest form of this language creates a sense of ambivalence in the ego-identity among the Bengali community in Assam. Akhtar (1995) wrote about the differences and intensities in "third individuation" depending on the factors driving the migration. He wrote about third individuation as essentially the reorganization of identity at an adult life catalyzed by the moral, aesthetic, social, temporal and linguistic transformation occurring in migrated populations necessary to adapt to a new place (Akhtar, 1995). This third individuation, Akhtar (1995) states is more prominently marked when the factors leading to the migration are "escaping from" financial hardship, political persecution and ethnic strife in comparison to migration that is led by "moving towards" to broaden horizons or find new financial opportunities.

Dr. Timir in his talks about this form of adaptation of language where the adaptation is not just to a place, but also marked by "escaping from" and "moving towards" better lives so to say -

"You see, many families who claim to be Assamese in Assam are not actually Assamese. They just claim to be so because they wanted to adapt two generations back. They started speaking Assamese in their households and that's it…Two generations later they are Assamese. I know the Principal of South Point School. He told me once that he did keep Bengali as an optional language for all students, but no one, not even the Bengali students prefer taking it up as their third language…even when they have a choice. The thought

behind this is that we are living here in Assam, we might as well have to work here…so I don't see my future in Bangla; I see it in Assamese. But I wouldn't say that all Assamese people are of anti-Bengali sentiment. Many of them are curious about our language, our culture…like right now are celebrating Rabindra Jayanti out loud in Maligaon, Guwahati, this itself was quite improbable a decade back."

Third individuation (Akhtar, 2016) refers to the unique challenges faced by individuals and communities who migrate and adapt to a new culture. This process involves a negotiation between the cultural values and traditions of their country of origin and the customs and expectations of the new host culture. Migrant communities often find themselves navigating complex identity issues, where they may feel torn between preserving their heritage and assimilating into the new culture. This struggle for identity can manifest in feelings of alienation, disconnection, or a sense of not fully belonging to either culture. However, Akhtar (1995) also emphasizes the potential for growth and resilience in this process, as individuals and communities develop a "third" identity that integrates elements from both cultures, leading to a more enriched and multifaceted sense of self.

Adopting a new linguistic identity is what creates the third individuation process in Bengalis of Assam. Akhtar talks about the adjustments and learning of the 'ways of being' and the sensorial/linguistic vocabulary one needs to acquire in a foreign land is sometimes so preliminary that the act of acquiring the habits of the new land itself becomes a shameful task. One comparison to be drawn out here is the linguistic acquisition that many Bengalis in Assam fail to do or despite attempts continues to speak like the Indian immigrant abroad who speaks English by the book and misses our own cultural innuendos. He says that "This propels an inordinately autodidactic attitude, which increases a sense of aloneness." (Akhtar and Choi, 2004)

Psychic state under Rootlessness

I would like to bring in excerpts from essays and reportage written by journalists and authors from Guwahati who very aptly describe the feeling of rootlessness that is specific to my own regional identity; wherein despite housing or even legal citizenship one might feel a lack of belongingness.

"On learning I was a "foreigner", I felt like a fruit sliced into two. I was old enough to realize that my ties to my land of birth had been altered forever. It was a moment of multiple severances: all that I thought belonged to me, suddenly no longer did. My home, my garden, my street, my neighborhood, my school, the road to Guwahati, the shops in nearby Fancy Bazaar, even my grandmother's house. Belonging was a matter of right and I did not possess that right, even by birth. The land belonged to someone else.

The most fundamental feeling that has stayed with me since that day is one of groundlessness. We lacked ground. I felt that lack in Calcutta (now known as Kolkata) whenever we visited my father's relatives, and when we finally moved there in the mid-1990s. Calcutta belonged to other Bengalis, not us. I have felt the same "lack" in Delhi for two decades as well. When I met Kashmiris who were fighting for their land, I envied them. A Bengali woman journalist from Shillong aired a similar sense of envy for the Assamese people. Her community faced persecution in 1979 and she felt jealous of the Assamese people for having what she did not – a homeland to call her own. We had no blood to offer, for the sake of any country"(Bhattacharjee, 2020).

Bhattacharjee (2018) writes "Fear changes the configuration of the world. It occupies your breath and eyesight. Fear was the defining feeling of my entry into history. I learnt I was an outsider in my own birthplace. A status I earned from the Assamese Hindus, who claimed to be the sole natives of Assam. *My schizophrenia vis-à-vis my homeland was born*."

Akhtar (2011) talks about the concept of 'trauma of geographical dislocation' which points out the psychic change that one encounters on change of "non-human environment". By non-human environment he intends to talk about the unfamiliar environment, climate and even the architecture. (p.3) This trauma is more specific when the movement is forced rather than voluntary. However, these feelings of dislocation by the change in one's physical environment, familiar households, change in objects- for instance losing one's paraphernalia such as wallet, shoes and clothes creates a feeling of being 'robbed of subjective continuity' and feelings of being existentially naked Akhtar (2011) states- "*Leaving a country for another or even one particular region for another region in the same country involves a disturbing loss of familiar topography."* When speaking of subjective discontinuity in a person creates a disequilibrium where the person experiences disequilibrium in the spatial space. This loss of familiar topography transition in the inner self is experienced when a person from a third world country or a country impoverished to a country with material abundance, he experiences a heightened sensory engagement with the material world in comparison with the material world. Heightened sensory engagement doesn't necessarily mean a sense of rootedness with the environment. He adds they can feel "*neither a sense of profound kinship with that environment, nor a sense of profound difference from it" (Searles, 1960, as cited in Akhtar, 2011, p. 396). The dislocated person might thus become over—and under—differentiated from his inanimate surroundings at the same time. In either case, the end result is far from his previous "going-on-being" (Winnicott, 1960)." (pg. 11)*

Significant environmental change, especially that associated with immigration and exile, involves losses of many kinds and destabilization of many varieties (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989; Volkan, 1990; Elovitz and Kahn, 1997; Ainslie, 1998; Akhtar, 1999a).

Akhtar introduces scenarios where the immigrant's world in the new land changes not only because of the change in one's relational dynamics but also because of the inanimate world around them. Stephen Frosh's concept of "reality constancy" (Frosh, 1966, as cited in Akhtar pg. 4) which is defined as "a concatenation of environmental experiences, memories, perceptions, ideas, etc. deriving from cathectic relationships with the human and non-human environment". What more importantly Akhtar tries to remind us of is the constant that we seek to find between the inner representations and the external world.

He uses Pacella's (1980) concept of the "waking screen" which "plays an active role in scanning, integrating, rejecting, or modifying all the newer precepts of object representations throughout life" (p. 130). (Akhtar, 2011, pg. 5) In Akhtar definition this screen is formed early in life, beginning at texture, height and skin of the mother forming the primal sensual mold. It is my sense that nonhuman elements of the child's environment (e.g., toys, crib, blanket, home, trees, local animals, the street on which the family lives, regional landscape, and even sounds and climate that are typical of the early environment) also contribute to the texture of the waking screen,
A 'state of alienation' comes about as Akhtar (2011) talks about when a person faces change in topography, climate and vegetation different from his formative years of growth. (pg. 8) Although it is difficult to draw further on this parlance in Bengali migration in Assam as in this context we are talking about two communities with similar topographies, climate and

vegetation, but I believe there lies an acoustic difference in the two communities. Akhtar (2011) talks about a boyish joy in the face of an analyst friend, raised in Botswana, at the sight of Bougainville. As for trauma of geographic dislocations, an easier established comparison arises when we are trying to contextualize the identity of the Indian in America, for instance, but it isn't easy to identity or fight for the characteristic distinction in the context of Assam, when we are talking about the partition from Bangladesh.

Dr. Timir points out repeatedly how trees are essentially how he recreates the sense of home and belonging. *"You know when the Bengalis build houses in Assam, they want to plant a jackfruit tree or mango tree in the backyard and not a Betel Nut tree…Why? Because we all want to recreate our sense of Bengal, our homeland that we left behind. And to make this feeling of homeland…the roots survive in us, I am having to struggle everyday against a different culture, food, language, clothing, ...it's happening everyday."* he says. Just like Akhtar's friend for whom bougainville resonated with whom, similarly for Dr. Prasanta's sense of home is rebuilt through jackfruit and mango trees. The choice of these trees as against betel nut trees might be due the latter being often seen in Assamese households or the plethora of bengali recipes with jackfruit and mango.

Akhtar, I believe, quite intentionally uses the statement and a particular linguistic difference while extending on this idea of geographical dislocations is when he uses the words "for instance, never registered that I was "living in India." I was just "living." Now residing in the United States for over thirty years, I am off and on conscious of "living in the United States" (Akhtar, 2010, pg. 9) He goes on to emphasize his experience and understanding of *living* as an inanimate fusion with the surrounding as well as painless demarcation from it.

Trauma of Geographical Dislocation

In 1980, seven years after leaving his homeland of India for the United States, poet Salman Akhtar penned two poignant lines:

"Asoodgi pe apni pasheman se hain hum,
Hain itne khush, ki thorey pareshan se hain hum"

These words, which roughly translate to "Affluence asks for its own price: a puzzling remorse / Is happiness beginning to worry me? Of course," capture the complex emotions of a migrant caught between two worlds.

As I reflect on Akhtar's words, I'm reminded of my own journey and the experiences of my interviewees. We often carry a heavy burden of guilt, having left behind our fellow countrymen for the promise of material abundance in a new land. This guilt manifests in various ways, one of which is a constant pressure to maintain connections with our roots.

Many of us find ourselves clinging to rituals and practices from our homelands, desperately trying to preserve a link to a time and place that no longer exists in our daily lives. This fervent adherence to tradition often evolves into a hyper-nationalist sentiment, a common trait among migrant communities. It's as if we're trying to prove our authenticity, our connection to a culture we fear losing touch with.

This phenomenon is frequently depicted in literature and films about the South Asian diaspora, where characters are defined by their ritualistic practices and strong ties to their culture of origin. I see a parallel in the Bengali community in Assam, though their situation is even more precarious. Unlike many immigrant groups, they have little opportunity to engage in the comforting rituals of their displaced culture.

In my own life, I've found myself holding tight to these practices, especially when I realized that I had spent most of my life merely "residing" in cities and towns rather than truly "living" in them. It was as if these rituals were an anchor, grounding me in a sense of identity and belonging.

Salman Akhtar, in his work, speaks of the "trauma of geographic dislocation" - a profound sense of disconnect that migrants experience when confronted with an unfamiliar environment. This trauma goes beyond mere homesickness; it encompasses the shock of encountering alien architecture, climate, and landscapes. It's particularly acute when the migration is forced rather than voluntary.

This dislocation isn't just about physical surroundings. It's about losing the familiar objects that make up our daily lives - our wallets, shoes, clothes. These seemingly mundane items are part of our identity, and losing them can leave us feeling "existentially naked," robbed of our sense of continuity.

As I ponder Akhtar's words and my own experiences, I'm struck by the universal nature of this struggle. We migrants are caught in a delicate balance, trying to embrace our new lives while holding onto the essence of who we were. It's a journey of constant negotiation, of finding ways to bridge the gap between our past and present selves.

Transgenerational Trauma in Bengali settlers in Assam

As psychoanalysts, we sense that we cannot avoid the alienated Other of our pre-history. And we cannot avoid being the alienated Other in someone else's pre-history.

I repeatedly narrativize, quite unintentionally but apparently, that the Bengali community despite the legality of citizenship status carries the blame of 'being' the Other. This narrative of blame on the Bengali community is more popular than the lived alienation of the community. Some of these Hindu Bengali families settled in Assam are the third-generation immigrants whose family members witnessed the 1971 Bengal Partition and some of whom fled to Assam. Although these are a smaller section among the Bengalis settled in Assam, their experiences of having survived the Bengali Hindu Genocide and settling in a location where they continue to face 'othering' is subject area which has received very little focus.

Generations after the Bengal partition, people who settled in Assam and northeast still look back at the partition with pain. The trauma not just exists in what was left behind but also lack of recognition and integration into the migrated space. Tuchindrai Jayanta speaks about this trauma, this 'trauma of removal' repeatedly -"Actually you know what I feel was the worst part about the Bengal partition is that in Punjab where was an area or sort of allocation provided to the people who migrated but it was not the same for Bengal because no specific region or location for us to settle down that was allocated so we kept migrating everywhere and roaming around. If you see the difference between the representation of Bengali in the Northeast who migrated here versus the Punjab who migrated after partition there is a vast difference. You would go Watch any advertisement on tourism of the state or representation on television you can see a very indianised representation of Punjab which is of the Hindu's there or the culture that was formed after partition but however if you see Assam and Tripura there is representation of Bihu dance or Hojagiri dance in Tripura. So where is the Bengali here there is no evidence of Bengalis in the representation."

In the past twenty years, extensive research has concentrated on the intergenerational transfer of trauma within diverse cultural groups and communities that have undergone experiences such as war, slavery, genocide, and political oppression. These studies reveal that trauma can be inherited through both biological and epigenetic means, as well as through family structures and communal storytelling.

Phantom

The notion of a "phantom" refers to the way traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations in a family or cultural group, even when direct knowledge or memory of the original trauma is absent. The concept was first developed by psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok to describe the ghosts or gaps left in an individual's psyche when a traumatic experience has been repressed, denied or unspoken (Abraham & Torok, 1994).
In the context of transgenerational trauma, the phantom represents the imprint left by traumatic events that affected previous generations. For example, the descendants of Holocaust survivors or victims of slavery may experience phantom pain, fears, urges or symptoms that convey traces of their ancestors' unresolved traumas (Danieli, 1998; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018).

Phantoms emerge when trauma has not been adequately addressed or mourned by earlier generations. The suppressed memories and emotions surrounding the trauma continue to haunt descendants, who may feel intuitions, symptoms or behavioral re-enactments related to the repressed material without understanding their origins (Volkan, Ast & Greer, 2002). They carry a loss that cannot be named or consciously grasped.

According to Abraham and Torok, phantoms are passed down through indirect communication, gaps and secrets within the family environment. The phantom gains power from being concealed - the truth of past trauma becomes a presence that cannot be spoken or addressed openly (Abraham & Torok, 1994). Healing transgenerational trauma requires bringing the phantom into the light, by uncovering family histories, listening to marginalized voices, and allowing repressed or buried knowledge to emerge into consciousness, testimony and mourning (Danieli, 1998; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018).

I would like to use instances from Tuchindrai Jayanta’s paintings that depict how he utilizes his paintings as a repository of healing the ‘phantom’. His testimonies highlighted throughout the text bring forth the transmission of memories not experienced but passed on, as Abraham and Torok (1994) mentions “traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations in a family or cultural group, even when direct knowledge or memory of the original trauma is absent.”

Figure 1: Tuchindrai Jayanta, "Dekchi with Red Cross" (2023). The traditional Bengali cooking vessel becomes a site of negation, marking both the loss of home and the impossibility of cultural sustenance in displacement.

Figure 2: Tuchindrai Jayanta, "Barbed Wire Series" (2023). The instrument of partition—the barbed wire his grandfather encountered fleeing Sylhet—returns as a compulsive visual motif across multiple canvases.

Figure 3: Tuchindrai Jayanta, "Runner's Knee" (2024). Human existence is reduced to a single function—escape. The bent knee joint becomes the sole marker of a life organized around flight.

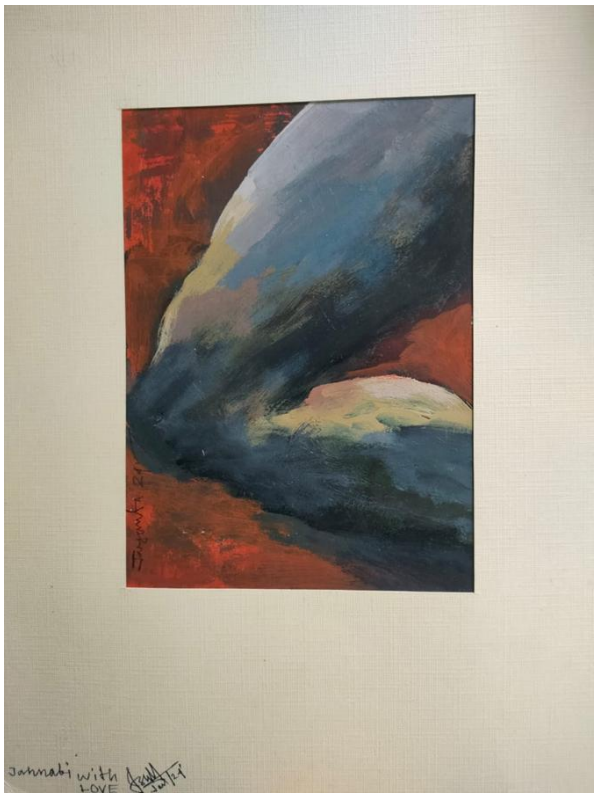

Figure 4: Tuchindrai Jayanta, "Perpetual Flight" (2023). Multiple iterations of running legs create a visual rhythm of endless escape, the body trapped in permanent readiness to flee.

CONCLUSION

This study of two Bengali individuals in Assam - Tuchindrai Jayanta and Dr. Timir - reveals how art and everyday practices serve as powerful vehicles for expressing and preserving cultural identity under conditions of linguistic minoritization. Through Jayanta's artistic expressions, particularly his recurring motifs of barbed wires, traditional cooking vessels (dekchi), and running legs, we witness how transgenerational trauma manifests in symbolic form, embodying what Abraham and Torok (1994) term as "phantoms" - the unconscious transmission of unresolved historical trauma. These symbols act not merely as artistic elements but as repositories of collective memory, encoding experiences of displacement, cultural disavowal, and ongoing struggles with abjection (Kristeva, 1982).

Similarly, Dr. Timir's conscious choice of planting specific trees - preferring jackfruit and mango over betel nut - demonstrates how everyday practices become acts of cultural preservation and resistance. These choices align with Akhtar's (2011) concept of "trauma of geographical dislocation," where individuals attempt to recreate familiar topographies to maintain psychic continuity. The process of third individuation (Akhtar, 1995) is evident in both participants' navigation of linguistic identity, revealing how language adaptation becomes both a survival strategy and a source of ongoing psychological negotiation.

This research contributes to our understanding of how minority communities preserve and transmit cultural memory through both conscious and unconscious processes. The interplay between autobiographical memory and symbolic expression, whether through art or daily practices, offers valuable insights into the psychological mechanisms of cultural preservation under conditions of minoritization. Furthermore, it demonstrates how psychoanalytic interpretation can illuminate the complex ways in which historical trauma, cultural identity, and linguistic minoritization intersect in the lived experiences of Bengali individuals in Assam, suggesting potential pathways for understanding and addressing similar phenomena in other minoritized communities worldwide.

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