CHAPTER THREE

ART AND IDENTITY: A SPECIFIC READING OF THE VISUAL ARTS PRACTICES OF ASSAM FROM 1970 ONWARDS

I

IDENTITY: MODERN/POSTMODERN

The "ethereal *night-lamp*" of classicist Basho disappears and the modernist moon emerging as the Sukantosque "*Scorched bread*" transforms into a postmodernist rectum ("*asshole of the sky*"- Milan Kundera). "Grand narratives" crumble in deconstructions; hierarchies of space/systems/categories are revised, the unified whole of Hegelian Absolute disseminates into a spectacle of plurality, a set of overlapping truth functionalities. The contemporary is indeed a vast theatre of contradictions and ironies. The political and economical regime offers globalisation, trans-national capitalism, and aspires for a uniformity of the lived qualitative experience. The cultural and social paradigms speak of multiculturalism and differentiations. This normative process of paradigmatic mutation in and through time encompasses the contemporary art discourses also, with the emergence of new categories in art (gender-subaltern-environmental, etc.) proliferation of new images/materials (material as metaphor) in the artistic practice, and translation of the cultural and artistic context/ parameters defined as national / modern into post colonial/post-modern. Of course, as to whether the post-modern is indeed a radically new disjuncture from modern is a contested issue. When the high modernist cultural pretensions – the autonomy of art/artistic freedom as pure form of creative impetus, the myth of auratic "artistic persona", the claims of 'originality' and 'uniqueness' – are dismantled in this age of consumerism and mass production/reproduction of images, the binary division of art and life, culture and commerce get coalesced. The subsequent 'aesthetization' of life and commercialisation of culture creates the "aesthetic hallucination of reality" (Jean Baudrillard "The Hyper-realism of Simulations" p.1050), life becomes artifice – manufactured rather than natural, everyday life becomes a forest of signs and images (as the essential language of consumerism itself), experience becomes simulacra. And as the impossible modernist drive for the absolute self knowledge and self identity fails with the resultant failure to grasp, capture

and order 'reality' in its absolute sense – in this very disjunction between the project and its claim modernity shifts towards the hyperreal. In the explosion of communication technology, representation and reproduction has become increasingly 'autonomous' and 'realistic' generating a sense of self-contained hyperreal world. From this perspective, if the simulacra and "hyperreal" is considered to form the core of substantive theory of post-modern (if there had been any) the post-modern looks primarily like a generalisation and intensification of the experience of modernity itself. Our present day internet culture, the heir to the universalising imperative of the modern project, the enhancer of the ideal of push-button democracy simultaneously also remind us of the life-state that escape from the complexities and limitations of the locale and the contextual, when reality becomes virtual, and freedom becomes freedom from the constraints of real situation and real environments and a world which unfolds this spectacle of betwixt and between – reality/simulacra, modern/post modern. The backdrop of such a vast theatre of unfolding contradictions and overlapping currents, crosscurrents and undercurrents in the contemporary world (International/National) have to be kept in mind while considering/reconsidering the dynamics of Identity and art reflexivity in the post-colonial period in Assam.

Identity – be it racial, religious, gender or cultural is evolved as we could gather in our discussion in the first chapter, rather than inherent unlike as suggested by the ontological concept of identity. Identity seeks manifestations in definite name, language, ritual customs, heritage, indigenous knowledge systems, social and political milieu, behaviour and life pattern, landscape and the overall environment. This necessarily has to be understood as a result of variable positions or as an unstable notion formed/deformed through dynamic confrontations that simultaneously take place in different settings. Its dynamism is reflected in its constant assimilations in the psycho-social identities both in the subjective and collective level where the process of socialization is a crucial factor. Considering the constantly evolved nature of the notion, conceptualized in a specific historical context of every society, community or group, it has to be understood in relation to the interests of the hegemonic forces existing in a particular historic space-time. In the Indian context, as we have already discussed so far the dynamics of identity formation took a definite departure in the counter discourse against colonization. Here the

dynamics of culture has to be critically scrutinized within the intermingled paradigm of nationalistic ideology and the politics of nation-state formation. To build the monolithic structure of Indian nation-state and likewise the national cultural mainstream, a strategy of homogenization has been adopted. As observed by Geeta Kapur:

> Once Independence has been gained, nationalism itself poses ontological questions – what is at stake in being Indian? And though the question may be easily devolved into rhetoric, there is a burden of it that rests on a particularly fraught class of individuals: namely, the urban middle class intelligentsia, including artists . . . when nationalism and unrealised socialism no longer suffice, the middle class intelligentsia must cope with further states of social entropy – in a way that other section do not – predicted, as it is, on a consciousness of self and identity within the nation state. This is the sort of burden, perhaps unreal and pretentious, that Rabindranath Tagore envisaged for the individual intellectual and artist in India. The responsibility to evolve his or her own subjectivity into an exemplary selfhood that indirectly but surely fulfils the demands of an exemplary nationhood. This burden assumes by proxy the ideal of a collective identity that may, moreover, come to resemble a form of socialism, as Nehru hoped. Certainly the left constituency of the intelligentsia can envisage totalities of another, more egalitarian, order. The imagination turns these expectations to allegorical account: all Third World narratives are national allegories, says Fredric Jameson." ("Contemporary Cultural Practice; some polemical categories", p.20-21)

Taking a stock of the subsequent scenario, in post colonial third world countries like India, Geeta Kapur further observes that there as capitalism and socialism are contested and ideological battles fought, deeply vexed identities in terms of class, language, race, gender, culture etc. are generated. At this juncture the politicization of cultural identities takes a new transformative form. The dialectics of political identity incorporates the cultural paradigm thereby raising a cacophony of multiple voices proclaiming significance of localisms, of otherness of unique identities. Within the paradigm of international art discourse, the multiple voice of others rising in volume were but the resultant of a world system re-inscribing the old binary division of tribalism versus universalism, nationalism vs. imperialism, first vs. third world. Most subtle is the way in which the constant re-contextualising between local and global perspective lures subsidiary players as intricate parts in the balancing of power, in the larger strategy to regulate regional cultures and politics. The inherent hierarchization often results in a proliferation of relatively powerless subcultures, which are received less as equal partners than as splinters groups of "thems". The

American art critic, Lucy. R. Lippard in her book Mixed Blessing outlines a pattern of cultural domination in the United States by a homogenized Euro-American society, and the consequent marginalizing of 'mixed race' group comprising African, Native American, Latin American and Asian natives. Lippard states:

> The Contemporary art world, a somewhat rebellious satellite of the dominant culture, is better equipped to swallow cross-cultural influence than to savour them . . . Ethnocentrism in arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that "transcends boundaries" - and is identifiable by those in power. According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art, qualities will prevail, so called minorities just haven't got it yet . . . . (Mixed Blessings p.7)

It is at the advent of post modernist thinking, when the hegemony and the cultural pretensions of high modernism got dismantled, the monolithic structure of Euro-centric internationalism has been countered, the artists from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Caribbean struggled to place themselves at the cultural "mainstream" invoking their "otherness" racially and culturally. The famous art exhibition "The Other Story" held in Britain in 1989-90 was one such seminal attempt. In fact, with the renewed interest in representation by the pop artists, photorealists or the superrealists in the 1960s and 1970s, a quarter of artists once again began to cognize the persuasive powers of art and started investigating more insistently the dynamics of power and privilege, especially in relation to issue of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. The ideological upsurge of the epochal movement like feminism and its subsequent political reflexivity in the realm of art further initiated paradigmatic changes in the foundation for the production and reception of contemporary art; with specific reference to the issue of gendered identity. Revolutionary and truth-revealing works like Judi Chicago's 'Dinner Party', Barbara Kruger's 'Your Gaze Hits the Side of My face', Cindy Sherman's 'Woman with Mask', Mary Kelly's 'Documentation vi' or Edwina Sandy's 'Christa' deconstructed both male gaze and the culturally constructed notion of gender interconnecting multiple dimensions in history, mythology, collective/individual memory, dream, fantasy encompassing all the genres of imaginations and socio-cultural productions. Furthermore, 1970s and 1980s saw the dismantling of all traditional truth claims and value standards, all hierarchical authorities and institutions with effect of political and social changes in keeping to the parallel emergence of art movements like Post-Modernism and Neo-Expressionism. Post-modernism began in reaction to earlier movements like Abstract

Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimal Art, Conceptual Art and Performance art, and flowered from the late 1970s to the 1980s. Rethinking the very nature of art making, postmodernism also envisioned a new spectatorship for its elaborately layered works. By undermining the viewer's effort to create traditionally "meaning" associations, the post-modern work defies desire for understanding. Rejecting the modernist preoccupation with originality, purity of form, and technique, the new generation of artists with postmodernist standing blur the boundaries between mediums and art, elite and popular culture, (the media at large) re-establishing ideas rejected by the modernist aesthetics. Postmodernism reintroduced representation, thematics and images disenchanted image that appropriated its own forms from history as well as from everyday popular culture. It paved way for investigating alternative subjectivities and narratives – beyond the modernist limits of the western cultural model in the contemporary practice with its exploration of the dialectical issues of identity and otherness. Since neo-expressionism, postmodernism and feminism art, the variant positions of art movements in the West as well as the trends in India became radically diversified with the advent of globalization permeating newer explorations and reflections of the cross-cultural/political/social with regard to the issues of identity as manifested in multiple innovations and experimentations in the lingual and conceptual level. The integration of the Indian economy into the global economy eventually led to further repercussions in the art production and the Indian artists began to grapple with contradictions of an expanding horizon and a fresh range of subsequent cultural problems generating an urgency to redefine identity. Ironically, this was achieved through a turning to external exigencies and agencies in the existential predicament of the embedded world rather than by means of the inward-looking introspection of an 'Indianness' by those previous generations of modern Indian artists. Herein we can mention the oft quoted remark by artist Gulam Mohemmed Sheikh of that generation and their quest for Indianness or 'Indigenism':

> . . . contemporary's concern for the unique features of his nation's history and traditions, it's surviving culture and it's environment. It is colonial countries that this concern becomes most intense, indeed obsessive. It is realized that the distinct features of the culture have been observed, often distorted by the colonialists, draining the people of their identity. This realization coincides with and feeds national consciousness that culminates in national independence. But the concern takes on another complexity in the postcolonial period. The intelligentsia in particular sees itself faced with the challenge of building a contemporary society.

> Without the readymade "VALUES" of the foreign system, and equally without the need for heroic chauvinism that was displayed in the face of derisive foreigners. It is then that fundamental search begins, to define a cultural identity in relationship to the past and aspirations for the future and in that process to discover a contemporary uniqueness in which these people have clearly been "left behind ...". (**Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, on Indigenism, Vrischhik, Ed, Geeta Kapur)**

However at the backdrop of postmodernist/post colonial/globalized new world order, artists like Atul Dodiya as we have mentioned in the foregoing started taking recourse in the culture and history of India only to further appropriate/re-appropriate, interpose/juxtapose it playfully in the contemporary contexts mediated by these new disseminations of the contemporary complexities of world-politic. Capitalizing on the post-modernist tendency towards ironic juxtaposition, Dodiya manages to use the vocabulary of western contemporary in creating a unique and potent pictorial language, through readjustment and reproaches to cultural and mythological figures such as Gandhi, Siva and Kali. Indian artist like Atul Dodiya and Chinese artist such as Huang Yong Ping are two of the representative names out of a huge number who encounter and interconnect different artistic cultures, specifically between those of Indian or Chinese and the European West in the international art scene. As such critical probing into the dynamics of racial and national identity is a major issue for engagement for a significant group of Chinese artists such as AI Wei Wei of 'Fairytale' fame, Yin Xiuzhen, Cao Fei, Kan Xuan, etc. in critiquing *Chinese-ness* both from within and outside – both as Self and Other. If Huang's and Dodiya's art can be understood to deal with the clash of artistic cultures while keeping its politics buzzing under the surface, some artists like New York-based, Kenya-born Wangechi Mutu (to cite just one example out of hundred) addressed the political implications of the dissolution of the different worlds (First/Second/Third) more overtly by pursuing interest in the effects of political ideologies on individual and group subjectivity (through local histories that addresses the issues of identity) by a definite strategy of citing the history of artistic photomontage as a socially engaged art form, while staking out a distinctly personal position with regard to sexual and ethnic politics, identity, and the body – the African female body to put light on the politics of representation of the 'Other'. In fact over the last four decades since seventies many artists in the international arena have been strategically weaving up narratives delving deep into the various aspects African/Afro-American, Asian/Euro-Asian and many such cultural and social identity formations in the backdrop of postcolonial and

post-modern dialectics. To name a few leading artists in this regard would include Benny Andrews who painted painting like "Outsider" "Insider" of the 'World Series', Betye Saar whose famous 'Aunt Jemmima' Series is considered highly evocative of the feminist and anti-racist stance, Sam Gilliam, Martin Puryear, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Masami Teraoka and others. Japanese American artist Masami Teraoka's highly political work like 'What are you looking at' composed by using Japanese source materials like traditional Ukiyo prints as his lingual experimentation and a savage irony as the ideational strategy, weaves up a narrative to critically represent the cultural/social/racial/sexual differentiations and 'othering' with regard to his identity in a western context. Hence, the ideological standing of the Diaspora artists are also worth mentioning here for taking up this issue of politics of representation by dialectical engagement in their social or political identity. (However, we would refrain from detailed discussion of these artists of Diaspora or those engaged in cultural/racial/gendered identity in the international arena as it is beyond the capacity of this chapter). Now coming back to the Indian scenario, artists like Atul Dodiya, Subba Ghosh, Subodh Gupta, Ananta Joshi, Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher, Bose Krishnamachari, Surendran Nair, Shibu Nateson, Baiju Parthan, N Pushpamala, T. V. Santhosh, Nataraj Sharma, Riyaz Kemu, Chintan Upadhyay and others have delved into the dynamics of Identity at various level. According to Girish Shahane "These artists might be collectively called Generation **i,** because they deal identity in an intellectual, ironic manner, imitating images rather than the world at last." ("Altered Egos", ART India, p.22)

He further comments in the same article that there are three phases of development of the idea of identity in painting since independence. The first phase is represented by artists like Akbar Padamsee and Jehangir Sabavala for whom identity didn't have any particular spatio-temporal domain but adhered more to the notion of Universalist humanism. The paintings of Kishen Khanna formed the link between the first and the second phase which was inaugurated in the nineteen seventies when artists conceptualised identity in distinctly social terms. To quote him "Class and physical location are integral to selfhood and relationships for Bhupen Khakhar's tradesmen, Sudhir Patwardhan's labourers, Jogen Chowdhury's Bengali middle class couples and Gieve Patel's street side vendors and beggars. This socially defined identity dissolves in the course of the nineties, as the self become more fluid, less integrated, and can encompass biography, fantasy and

even political statements all at once. This unitary, expansive space which had hitherto dominated painting is often replaced by a patch work of juxtapositions. Elements within compositions might be locatable in space and time but do not necessarily share those features with their neighbours. Most Generations **i** artists have experimented with the self-portrait, a form seldom seen in India previously. The theatrical and fanciful are highlighted in the way they depict themselves" ("Altered Egos", p.23).

Such manifestations and explorations in the dynamics of identity in the international and national scenario since the seventies of the last century can provide us an insightful direction in our reading of the artistic narrations and constructions of the post colonial Assam which have been rendered in the same period till date. We begin our reading with a painting by Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjeedra Narayan Bhattacharjee as our take-off point.

The middle aged man clad in western suite and sunglasses sit with his feet on a dead tiger, his hunting trophy. He proudly holds his rifle in his hand and his breast is adorned with gallantry medals. His docile wife in traditional Assamese attire sits by his side. A huge red bindi adorns her forehead. The man is fair, while the woman is of dark complexion. The sturdy "Macho" patriarch projects an air of heroic exhibitionism by his very enacted gesture and the frontal gaze that challenges the spectators. The juxtaposition of two opposing sets of features in complexion, dress, and gesture act as certain significant signifiers of the visual text to decode the layered suggestivity hidden beneath the naïve expressionism of the figurative-narrative mode of expression. This work titled "My Parents" (Oil, 1982 visual 40) by the artist Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjeedra Narayan Bhattacharyee which we now discuss here as a take-off point of our research, plays up a comic-theatrical, mock-serious enactment with a subtle humour which also simultaneously plays up the nuances of human desire/dream/fantasy mostly evident in the popular cultural practice like the medium of studio photography where a mythic construction of the self is often cherished. It is irrelevant whether the visual text is a conscious critical reflexivity on the part of the artist. The content of the text itself unfolds an iconic signification of a specific cultural pattern of a colonized group. It is a photo-realist documentation of a process of hybridization, of appropriation, of formation and deformation in a culture. To quote Homi K Bhabha:

> Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements: . . . as the basis of cultural identifications or aesthetic evaluations. What is at issue is the performative nature of the production of identity and meaning the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently "opening our", remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of identity or transcendent value- be it truth, beauty, class, gender or race . . . (W)here identity and difference are neither one nor the other but something else besides, in-between, (there is an agency that find its creative activity) in the form of a "feature" where the past is not originary, where the present is not simple transitory. It is, if I may stretch a point, an interstitial future, that emerges in between the claims of the past and the needs of the present…….The "present" of the world that appears in the art-work through the breakdown of temporality significant intermediacy, familiar to the psychoanalytic concept of Nachtraglichkeit (deferred action): " a transferential function whereby the past dissolves in the present, so the future (of identity or art) becomes (once again) an open question, instead of being specified by the fixity of the past." ("Post Postmodernism/Post Colonialism", p.47)

The visual narrative of the above mentioned art work too unfolds certain queries with regard to the fixity of identity (our identity) in the post colonial phase when we consider the contexts of modernity of the generation who are the children of colonisation and its Siamese twin modernisation. The resultant hybridization of the selfhood and dissemination of the fixed/uncontaminated/pure/authentic identity which is often imagined and constructed by a colonial subject is brought under scrutiny by the text further unfolding the complexities of a intermediating self transgressing from pre-modern to modern to post-modern through this apparently simple rendering of two opposing subjectivities. It is worth mentioning here that at the very first glance one can do a feminist reading of the text also where the male figure can be seen as the representative figuration of the aggressive, authoritative and exploitative patriarchy and the female the gendered 'other'. But as we have seen and analysed, the text is fine signification of the dialectics within identity and a pointer to the in-between-ness of our identitarian existential predicament.

Such inherent contradictions and dilemmas within the dynamics of identity or the discourse of local/global dialectics has to be taken into account while studying the representations and reflections of the art works in a state like Assam. As Munindra Narayan Bhattacharjee reflects the element of hybridity, accumulation, discursivity and appropriations within the cultural identity,

artists like Rajkumar Majinder, Simantajyoti Baruah, Kishore Das and others critically represent the local-global dialectics emphasizing the issue of commodification and fossilization. The principal thematic that predominate these texts are impact of globalization/westernization/colonization, modernist aporias manifested in the heritage of indigenous people, and the economic dehydration of the local culture. As we had observed in the previous chapter, in the early phase of modern art scenario of Assam, reflections of Assamese cultural milieu was the focal point and the renderings were merely naturalistic and realistic in nature with a subtle amount of romanticization. Tarun Duara's 'Weaver', Bishnu Rabha's 'Bodo Damsel', Hem Mahanta's 'Oza palli' were examples of such reflections. Asu Dev's pointillist depictions rendered in figurative mode captured the proletariat, which are fine life studies of the Assamese locale. Problematization of the issue of identity whether racial or cultural was to take a serious departure at the advent of 1970s with the emergence of a few senior artists like Shobha Brahma, Neelpawan Baruah, Benu Mishra etc. From the 1970s onwards, two parallel trends are visible. In the representations of the first, an artistic exploration in the lingual/stylistic and mediumistic/material is evident with incorporations of a range of local iconographic motifs, myths, descriptions and evocation of past/present indigenous culture. Artists like Neelpawan Baruah, Benu Mishra, Pranabendu Bikash Dhar, Ajit Seal, Samiran Baruah, Dilip Tamuly, Krishna Goswami, Khil Bahdur Chetri etc. are the exponents of this trend. The parallel trend exhibits a more critical socio-political reflexivity thereby delving into the questions of political identity. Here political identity is indistinguishable from cultural identity. The most significant example is Shobha Brahma whose works deal with an existential predicament of a distinct ethnic group. On the other hand, Benu Mishra's critical satires besides taking up the issue of modernistic nihilism, escapism, political turmoil and violence also comments on the repercussions of aggressive political identity. The upsurge of Assam movement in the 1980s acted as a significant kindler in such engagement that is apparent in Noni Borpujaree's surreal renderings with a recurrent motif of a scarecrow. Maneshwar Brahma and Debananda Ulup are another two significant artists who have been engaged in critical mediation of ethnic violence, identity conflicts and the aggressive nihilism of the global vs. local. A significant development in the symbolic reflexivity about the politics of identity in Assam is the multiplicity of the several ethnic/tribal voices which could be observed in the advent of the decade of eighties which gained momentum in the following decades. However,

the formation and formulations about identity be it ethnic, racial or cultural is often embedded and intermingled within the greater concerns of the political identity of a geo-political space called Assam/ North-East. It substrates on the complex binary division between the 'centre/mainstream' and 'periphery/sub-stream' where Assam/North-East has been historically occupying that position teetering in the periphery of the nation's imagination.

II

IDENTITY: GEO- POLITICAL OR SUB NATIONAL IDENTITY AS THE COUNTER DISCOURSE OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND AS AGAINST THE TENDENCY OF STEREOTYPING

The people of Assam very often has lashed out the frustration, angst and their sense of alienation through various socio-political agitations triggered by a deep sense of identity crises and economic laggardness resulting into oft quoted phrase of "Step motherly treatment' of the centre in the literary texts and popular vernacular writings. In fact the coinage of a popular phrase 'Sat Bhani' or 'Seven Sisters' connoting the seven states of the north-eastern region has its root in such long standing sense of isolation and neglect felt not only by the Assamese but also by the inhabitants of the other North Eastern States. Herein I refer to my article to further substantiate the internal dynamics behind this coinage:

> "The Seven Sister or the Solitude of Binnorie" – a poem by William Wordsworth had once ignited the imagination and provided the much needed metaphor for a geopolitical space teetering to the periphery of the Nation's imagination. The poem, a lyrical rendering of a melancholic tale of seven sisters who turned into seven islands when attempted rape and violation by the sea-pirates, taking advantage of the apathy of a egotistical, bellicose, malingerer father, found mass acceptability as a metaphor to signify or represent the seven states of the North-Eastern corner of India, when they came to be known as 'Seven Sisters" during the seventies of the last century. As in the poem, the north-eastern states evoked a similar sense of socio-political-psycho-cultural suppression, marginalisation, turmoil and disturbance with regard to the existential/circumstantial contexts. (Read The Nation State as the Father, the seven states as the seven sisters in the poem and all the socio-political maladies as the pirates.) Encompassed by the common legacy of a hybrid, eclectic culture and history unique to this specific geo-political space the

> metaphor bound the land and the people of the north-eastern states as a unified, homogenised entity, segregated from the rest of The Nation by a "chicken neck" called Siliguri corridor." ("A Metaphor and Some Young Turks" p. 14)

In my previous chapter I have discussed about the process of constructing a homogenized monolith of the National Identity by the Indian Nation state in the colonial and post-colonial time and the resultant oppositional centrifugal forces against such tendency which could be observed in Assam/North-East also. Among the artists who have addressed this particular aspect of political identity of a geopolitical space with their eclectic lingual/material/ mediumistic experimentations in various forms including the 'new media' expressions, the two representative names are Rajkumar Majinder, and Desire Machine Collective, each representing their specific decade of emergence in the nineties and the first decade of this century in the chronological order of their name.

Rajkumar Majinder, an artist sincerely believing in the role of art as a tool for mediation and intervention, played a significant part in ushering in this vibrancy and momentum in the art scenes of Assam. As a committed artist of this genre he has been engaged in making, series of politically reflexive texts to articulate problematize and mediate the lived-experiences of a life tormented by conflicts and dilemmas. With a profound sense of political consciousness he maps and captures the degradation and degeneration, the alienation and dread, and the terror and violence of the time one is embedded into. Raj Kumar Majinder's political reflexivity substrates onto the ground realities of the world where he lives confronts and mediates though the symbolic acts of artistic expression. The function of such neo-realism that he subscribes to is to resist the powers reification in the society (read consumer society) and to reinvent that category to totality which is systematically undermined by existential fragmentation in all levels of life. His concerns with the modern urbane subjectivity enable him to react to the human situation within the whirlpool of modernist / post-modernist existential predicament. The eclectic language of Rajkumar Majinder captures the opportunism, vainglory, greed, hypocrisy and corruption of the modern subjects of the consumerist gimmick cult, where each and every human crisis is resolved to instantaneous consumerist consumptions and thereby catering to commoditization of all the ethical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of life in his paintings like *"The New E Class Arrives"*

(1989) with a caption that reads “See Comfort with New Eyes!” Several grotesque masks on the human figures and a ferocious dog hanging out it’s tongue all jumbled into a brand new Mercedes Benz projects the metaphor of the ‘new class’ – the power mongers, the rat racers and lecherous hedonists with their re-instated power invested by of modernist means of capital accumulation at the cost of deprivation of other classes. The consumerist gimmick cult gets further manifested in the satirical rendering by the artist – “System Works” (1998) where each and every human crisis is resolved to instantaneous consumerist consumptions and thereby catering to commodification of all the ethical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of life. The cultural power politics of consumer cult in the new imperialistic aggression of globalised economy taken in the context of third world often projected onto the bodies of women is critically visualized in his work “Beauty Parade” (1989) In an interview Rajkumar comments: “As a member of third world, post colonial, peripheral region, I have certain responsibility as an artist. The place where I was born and the environment amidst where I grew up obviously exert influence on my part, thereby making me obliged to speak for them” (Sutradhar 1.12, 16-30th June, 1989). The new imperialistic aggression of globalised economy taken in the context of the ‘third world’ post colonial ‘peripheral’ places like Assam has been finely depicted in his works. The artist weaves up his own idiom and artistic vocabulary complemented by a rich range of images, pictorial signs and motifs layering the empirical ‘everyday’, the socio-political and the aesthetical. Operating within the dynamics of the symbolical, the allegorical and the metaphorical, he seems to search for the “Significant form in the day to day world of the mundane” from the advertising world and images of mass-media to the sources from tradition and indigenous culture. He plays up the strategy of appropriation / re-appropriation and interpretation/reinterpretation. He picks up an image ‘given’ and subverts it to give a new meaning. Layered with multiple suggestions, allusions and revelations, the ‘condensed’ world of Rajkumar Majinder manifests a fine blending of the lingual and the conceptual. His technical finesse adds an extra spark to it. At times it needs a trained eye to understand the subtle manner of his art which is not ‘literal’ in the sense of the term. Armed with such distinct traits, Rajkumar Majinder goes on to create and re-create a series of ‘New Age Fables’ and ‘Witty tales’. His works exhibit all these predominant traits and also marks a new take-off in the context of lingual experimentation. His exploration for the ‘watery effect’ or the ‘fluidity’ of the medium is a lingual / technical departure from his earlier style of rendering. Apart from this, ‘Red’ seems to be

the predominant colour scheme of the works. Red connects them all the works – red sparks of the blood stained days of "finding oneself in the pool of one's own blood", and also a volume about the deep passion of the artist in this regard. Whether it is the triptych of a hill wounded by 'civilization' or an anvil in blood (a signifier of the killing of immigrant labourers by militants). Red says it all. Finally, it is a tribute to 'Mahatma' a critically reflexive restore to state the "being and becoming" of his truth and ideology in the present day world and further, a visual tribute to the poetic revelations of Nilmani Phookan an esteem poet of Assamese literature. The work titled "Assam Ghayal" (visual 41), by artist Rajkumar Majinder is worth-mentioning as it is a critical text about the multiple dimensions and layered dynamics of the contemporary cultural politics. The text takes a politically reflexive, subversive stance questioning the invasive forces of capitalist cultural imperialism and its various implications using a take off point from the Reality Show Indian Idol. These attempts as we can see are reflections of the art (or the state of art in case of Rajkumar's work) at the time of globalisation and their translations and transformation. This take-on is a very interesting incident which had multiple implications on the socio-cultural and political/commercial arena of Assam evoking an overwhelming reverberation in the public space. I am referring to the case of singer Debojit Saha, an unknown youth from remote town of Silchar in Assam who became an instant TV celebrity by winning the Indian Idol title. The music contest of Indian Idol by Zee TV, a take-off from American Idol, ignited unprecedented passion among the people of Assam in 2006 when Debojit Saha, got selected to the semi finals of the contest. The voice of Debojit had all of sudden become, the Voice of Assam, the Voice of the margins, the subaltern (!) who had challenged the Centre or the Mainstream for the common mass of Assam/North-East, who have been always afflicted by the malady of socio-psychological paranoia of alienation and marginalisation at times real and at times illusory. Taking advantage of the situation were the media groups with sensational coverage, the Channel telecasting the show with increasing TRP ratings and of course the Mobile phone Companies used for fanatical voting and campaign for the Son of the Soil! Miracle happened. The century old lingual rift between the Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley (because of the forceful implementation of Bengali as official language in Assam instead of Assamese by the British), suddenly evaporated like dewdrops in the Sun as the "Bengali" boy was embraced so warmly by the whole population. The star winner was welcomed by All Assam Student Union, the most proactive political organisation

who lead the famous Assam Agitation for identity survival in the eighties, with a procession accompanied by recital of traditional instruments along with conch; drum, cymbals and traditional dance forms from the airport to the huge felicitation ceremony conducted for the cultural ambassador. After some time Star cement which have their production units in Meghalaya, a state rich with raw materials for manufacturing cement, made the singer its cultural ambassador and started a campaign-Buy Star Cement and win a ticket to Mumbai to meet Debojit Saha! It is this incident which artist Rajkumar Majinder uses as a signifier to comment upon and critique the contemporary theatre of contradictions and paradoxes in a world jeopardized by various forces and players of economic globalisation and its consumerist tendencies bringing forth long standing implications in the cultural/social contexts. Moreover he also comments upon the dangers of ecological threats to the North-East, produced by these companies like Star Cement the name of aggressive modernisation. But the most significant subversion was made in the slogan of the painting which said "Go to Assam instead of Mumbai" challenging the very notion of centre and periphery.

Rajkumar Majinder's engagement in the construction/ deconstruction/ reconstruction of the political/ social/cultural identity of a geopolitical space like Assam can be seen actualised in an artistic narration of mix media work "Assam Boil & Toil" (visual 42) which can be read as the signification of such internal dialectics. "Assam Boil & Toil" is a take on the logo of 'Assam Oil', the premier oil refining and marketing company of the state which is a marker for economic growth, prosperity, modernisation of the state apart from being the signifier of Assam's identity in the global map and world economy. For the global world Assam's identity is often equated with resources like oil or tea and hence this appropriation of the logo becomes the metaphorical representation of the land, people, and their holistic politico-cultural identity. The logo of the company represents the one horned rhinoceros, the state animal of Assam which is found only in the state in the entire world. Rhino which epitomizes power energy and solidity of existential being in the symbolic representation is subversively shown as wounded and collapsing in the visual narration of the artist. The pun played upon the word oil thereby transporting it into boil to capture the identity angst and crises of the place of people is another significant subversion. Perhaps it becomes a signifier of the entire dynamics of identitarian concern which is the central concern of

the sub-nationalist awareness about one's peripheral post colonial status. Now let us come to the second representative name who have played significantly in questioning this very operational dynamics of political identity of the geopolitical with regard to this complex binaries of centre/periphery formation. At the GENNEXT symposium (Kolkata, 2009) on "Has art become more real and democratic after Globalisation?", as one of the speakers of the penal discussion, I had talked about this specific strategy of setting the thief to catch the thief in some of the politically reflexive praxis adhered by the contemporary artists. If globalisation as the hydra headed phenomenon brought forth multiple implications in the last two decades, this community of artists appropriated and adopted the technological equipments and tools ushered by this very phenomenon to critique, question, mediate and negotiate dialectically those very implications embedding their (our) existential predicament. As such, it is a well known fact that in the pan Indian scenario, post 1980s and 1990s saw artists using new material, new structures, conceptually coded signs, bringing forth questions of art and its object-hood to a head investigating it's status at the level of assembly and installation. This resulted in dismantling replete images as well as bringing in new purpose to formalist interventions, along with extended reproduction strategies like video, digital art, net art, photocopy complimented with artist's individual performance. But these were mere lingual means and strategies to address larger issues at hand. If for the Marx-oriented camp, the complex terrain of the contemporary operating within the new paradigm of globalisation is the expansion of the capitalist system, the "McDonaldization and globalisation of Nothing", for some quarters, it signifies a new unified world order filled with egalitarian opportunities. However without going into much complex theoretical dialectics, we can say that the contemporary realities as such have been definitely regulated by new technologies initiating technocratic forms of politics. Precipitated by rapid advances in informational technologies, this economic-technological phenomenon has brought fourth epochal changes in political structures and social organisations, taking an uncharted course towards new, global and trans-national forms of the organisations of power. Present world in its contemporary manifestation is not simply a product of techno-scientific development, but also points to a fundamental confluence of power and technology, to a concourse of the circuits of power and technicity of relations (social, economic, personal, and political) as pointed out by thinkers like Peter Sloterdijk, Jean-Luc Nancy

and others. In view of the circumstances, a plethora of issues and questions emerge one of which is related to the changing nature, position relationality, technicity and traits of art and aesthetics.

These are the issues and questions at hand which contemporary cultural practitioners like "Desire machine" attempts to address. Desire Machine Collective seems to work in two parallel operations, one the creative genre of research and productions of video art on various themes and issues and the other of undertaking curatorial projects such as Peripherry to facilitate site/space for interdisciplinary creative ventures and discourses on art/culture in particular and life in general in its various socio-political manifestations. Conceived by Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukailya, it is a media collective based in the Northeast of India to initiate an artist's led alternative art space located on an abandoned ferry (barge) on the river Brahamaputra in Guwahati, Assam. As the initiatives by Desire-Machine translates into this particular concept of a "curatorial project" called "Peripherry" on a ferry (a pun on the notion of centre/periphery and the subsequent notion of North-East as a peripheral pocket in the nation's imagination), it seeks to alternate the prevalent modes, predicaments and notions and wills to set the trend in the reverse order. If the trend is that of going away from the periphery to the centre – the so called "mainstream", it dreams of bringing the centre to the periphery setting a new mode of reversal. As a nomadic space on the ferry (called Chandordinga) for hybrid practices, it aims to work as a trans-local initiative which looks at the critical uses of technology for collaborative experiments. The collective intends to call the space a "laboratory", to promote experimentations in art, ecology, technology, media and science, and thereby create a public domain, for critical reflections. It has strived to bring together people engaged in cross disciplinary practice to create a network space (both physical and virtual) for negotiating the challenge of contemporary cultural production.

Dictated by the very strategy of setting the thief to catch the thief about which I pointed in the beginning, Desire Machine had began their journey in the midst of this decade by using post-modernist, and a conceptualist/minimalist lingual expression with medium like video and the internet. With certain attempts for critiquing various issues like politics of identity, centres and periphery, displacement and immigrations, borders and boundaries, and various other issues concerning the local and global against the backdrop of globalisation, with specific reference to the

socio-political dialectics in the North-East (works for instance, “Disturbed Area Network” (visual 43) “Notebooks on Geography,” “Politics of Real Time” (visual 44), “Alpha Beta” (visual 45) etc. Desire Machine operated in a quite politically reflexive interventional stance in the beginning of their journey. “About Body Borders” (2006, video, a single channel, 10 min loop) is a video that questions the representation of the northeast in mainstream India media as a deviant, exotic space. To tape the underlying currents in the construction/reconstruction and deconstruction of the notion of a nation and the politics of building stereotypes in social mechanism is the central concern of this video. “Daily Check Up” (MiniDv, 2005, visual 46) looks at everyday violence experienced in a region of imposed imagined geographies, pushed into the periphery of a nation's imagination. The recurrent motif of this video is a visual shot of security check up in the airport terminus. Based on the experience of extra “tactful” security check up that the youths from the north-eastern states undergo, the video posits certain questions about the representation of North-east as the terrorist states in the imagination of the nation. The hand of the security personnel frisking the body of a youth becomes a suggestive pointer of the aggressive invasion of the private space as well as the violation of the human rights by the controlling authority/ nation state in the name of maintaining law& order situation. Here the body becomes the political anatomy or a signifier of the “Notebook on Geography”. “Alfa Beta” (Mini Dv, 2005) questions the politics of representation of the northeast in mainstream Indian media. There is a re appropriation of existing representation. Textual pun playing is the rendered strategy as seen in the title itself with layered implication. Triggered with intended pun-wit-satire, Desire Machine also used footage of popular Bollywood movies like “Tango-Charlie” to deconstruct the politics of construction and stereotyped representation about the North-East. “D.A.N” or Disturbed area network is another such take-on on the issue where North-East as an exotic Tourist space unfolds the internal contradictions. Taking out the spectator on a tourist journey it eventually bares upon the ground realities of the geopolitical space afflicted by several maladies of modernist nihilism and marginalisation.

However, Desire Machine had undergone a transition in their ideational as well as expressional mode in a subtle way in and through time in their definite discourse making their art and stance more trans-national, expansive and suggestive. Overt political reflexivity was given way to more metaphorical suggestivity, though the political layering at the core remained the

same. Maya Anglouean “Personal-is-political” kind of creative gestures became predominant with doors and windows open for multiple interpretation, multiple suggestions and non-fixity of positions. Their subsequent recent works are pointer to such transition. 25/75 (2006, mini DV), a work based on an obsessive preoccupation of some of the people of Meghalaya called “Teer” (arrow), a game of betting on numbers, interpreted from dreams of the previous night, weaves the a dream like world with cut-in device of certain surrealist shots in between, as everything just seems to go by. It is a take on the slices of Reality as operative in various levels – as a perception as well as, as a lived experience. 30/12 (2009, Mini DV) is set on a single day of an orchid seller, who goes about his daily work on the streets of Shillong, on the very day of the execution of Saddam Hussain. As one man is being executed in a far off land and one man is selling the cure for all problems in the backdrop of this “drama”, the mock-comical overlapping of the multiple realities within the Everyday Reality is explored upon both metaphysically and politically. The work entitled “Passage” (2006, mini DV) seems more abstract, conceptual and surreal as a recurrent image of a overlapped passage/doorframe keeps emerging, merging and diverging in an ongoing lyrical composition being interrupted recurrently by a dark blank void and silence. The disruption, a conscious strategy to shatter the building climax in the experience of the spectator is a symbolic pointer to the construction/deconstruction and the making/unmaking of our realities at various levels which we tend to take in as the given reality without any permutations. Here, being ordered and reordered in endlessly different constellations, the detached observer follows endless exploration and search for his own reality. Perhaps, the most poignant rendering of their recent oeuvre is a 39 minute video called Residue (2010, 16mm film) which has been shot in a redundant Thermal power plant in the outskirts of Guwahati. As stated by the collective, the interest of the work is in constructed signs that can never be replicated or remembered and in the relationship between matter and memory. There is also an endless circularity and an unbearable silence – the pause that punctuates the experiences. It can also be seen as an exploration to dissipate the dichotomy of man/ machine, nature/culture, the Wild and the Civilisation. With each frame poetically rendered and solemn music of Buddhist Chanting by Lama Tashi further enhancing the effect, this work excels lyrically in weaving a fine blend of the conceptual and the lingual expression.

Desire Machine collective is perhaps the forerunner in new media work of sound installation in the north-Eastern region. Their sound installations such as Sacred is a technological "sound map" that replaces colonial map making and Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted is a nine channel site specific sound work installed in the Deutsche Guggerhein museum, Berlin in 2008. As pointed out by them, in “Sacred”, the path through the protected area was precisely documented by means of GPS and in the printed version, QR codes are positioned along the trail, which can be decoded using a smart phone, thus making the original recordings audible again. Their concept note on Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted (sound installation) states:

> The project seeks to summon ‘false memories’ via a forest soundscape. The work questions the notions of materiality in terms of the taboos and if “taking sounds” falls within the scope of the belief. It draws from the sounds collected from Law Kyntang, the sacred forest in Meghalaya that has emerged as unique ecological system based on a traditional belief system and not on any laws or regulations. Here, destruction of any plant or animal life or taking any object from this forest is forbidden. The installation’s conceptual point of departure is critic / theorist of technology Paul Virilio’s definition of ‘space’. He points out that the limits or boundaries of the city itself have come into question, largely because of new informational and communicational technologies that introduce a novel idea of space, i.e., space as virtual, dematerialised. He also points to the relative devaluation of a physical idea of space and place” (As cited in the catalogue).

At this point, one is however grappled with certain dialectical query as this entire issue of de-contextualisation and de-territorialisation is not without its inherent contradictions and dilemma with regard to the issue of the invasion/penetration by authoritarian forces/power structures aided and privileged by technological empowerment over those local agencies who have been traditional guardians of the site (Read here the forest of Meghalaya which has been for ages guarded by the local tribe of the Khasi as sacred and mythological/culturally/religiously sacrosanct) and unfolds many questions without definite answers. However I would refrain from any analytical deliberations on these two works as I could not witness these site specific works either physically or in the documented version.

Mapping this entire discourse of this collective since its emergence, we can definitely state that though there has been a transitive change in the lingual expression and ideational position from overt political reflexivity to more suggestive metaphorical/symbolic and subdued narration,

an undercurrent of a quintessential political concern with regard to the locale (Assam in our reading) has been a continuous process in the discourse of the collective. It is especially evident through their project of Periphery which also account for a certain endeavour in art-activism. Simultaneously working in the individual level as a media collective and as the initiators to the trans-local/national space for various multimedia experimentations in the inter disciplinary mode in the collective level, Desire Machine has taken up many projects, conducting several events, seminars, residencies (with many participants from India and abroad) under the umbrella of Peripherry. Projects such as The Two Rivers (Thames – Brahmaputra) and a series of symposium around this are one such example amongst many. Two Rivers is a substantive practice-based research project being developed collaboratively between Periferry and Chelsea College of Art and Design, and TrAIN, London. The first of these series were held in London in 2008 called "Two Rivers symposium". This used rivers as a backdrop to an exploration of how artists work across platforms in search of conceptual innovations, and collaborate in situations that link art education, industry and academia. The second one was held in the ferry Chandordinga, on February, 2009, which brought together a cross section of artists, specialists and researchers to examine collaborative, context based arts practice and how these relate to trans-national issues in the context of Assam and the region. The two rivers acted as geographical motifs for examining interpretations of difference, with participants offering perspectives from the arts, social and natural sciences and creative and industrial practice. Working such text on this river called Brahmaputra which has come up as the metaphor for the identity of the land and people of this place for ages in the literary and cultural expression of the people (so aptly captured in Bhupen Hazarika's famous musical rendition – "Mahabahu Brahmaputra"), is itself a pointer to the fact that in a symbolically reflexive subdued and subtle manner concern for the geopolitical / locational identity of a place of people is a ideational concern for artists and collective like Desire Machine in Assam.

III

IDENTITY: MARGINAL/ ETHNIC/ TRIBAL – MULTIPLE VOICES

If this sub-national positioning against a monolithic national Identity or interventional resistance against stereotyping of a definite geo-political space discussed above – accounts for a definite tendency in the politics of identity in a broader and larger sphere, the same tendency give rise to multiple voices of identity assertion and reflection in another plane within the same geopolitical space in relation to other units of ethnic identity where certain majority becomes hegemonic in nature. If Naga or Assamese identity in the north eastern part of the nation plays up against a homogenised/ monolithic structure of the National Identity, there are many ethnic and tribal groups such as the Bodos or Karbis which have come forward to play against such hegemonic power structure within the north-east region or the state of Assam. Even if not as an aggressive oppositional forces, the emergence of multiple voices of identity assertion to preserve, promote and expand their unique racial/cultural attributes has become a significant development in the post colonial period especially in the decade of eighties and the following decades. The spread of education and modern employment, growing socio-political-cultural awareness among the ethnic groups and the emergence of an elite educated middle class triggered off such development along with some associated socio-economic and politico-historical problems like immigration. Immigrants from bordering nations gave rise to such renewed interest in identity assertion owing to a deep sense of loosing one's identity and the simultaneous identity crises. The cultural or artistic expressions which have reflected upon this aspect by symbolically mediating the embedded circumstances often cater to certain strategies and approaches. The predominant among such strategies is the renewed interest in one's past, history, tradition, and myths which are the basic constituents of one's cultural composition or cultural markers. Here appropriation and re-appropriation of these cultural markers becomes a distinct interventional strategy. In our course of study we come across such appropriation and reappropriation as a major meditational tool as manifested in the works of artist like Debananda Ulup.

Myth, folk tales, oral poetry, religious beliefs, traditional ideas and local images are manifested in great opulence and abundance in the sense of epic theatrically in the vast spectrum

of folk cultural resources in the region of Assam, where more than one hundred and three ethnic groups inhabit, where juxtaposition of real and unreal or fantasy is a part of the lived traditions. The artistic oeuvre of self taught artist Devananda Ulup belonging to the Singpho tribe is a typical rendering of imbibed Singpho tribal myths, ideas and local images where traditional myth are recreated as modern myths, adding to the artistic expression a new dimension. Appropriation of myth to suggest and generate newer meanings by transversing them to allegorical historical statements is a characteristic feature. For Raymond Williams:

> Myth has been held to be a truer (deeper) version of reality than (secular) history or realistic description or scientific explanation. This view ranges from simple irrationalism to super naturalism, to more sophisticated account, in which myth are held to be fundamental expression of certain properties of human organization. These expressions are timeless or fundamental to particular periods of culture. (Key Words, p.)

As observed by William, assimilation of the mythic function to the creative function of art and literature has become involved with difficult modern senses of imagination, creation and fiction and has been used to illustrate and analyse human nature. For Rolland Barthes, myth is a type of speech conveyed by discourse. It is a system of communication or a message, a mode of signification, a form inscribed with historical limits, condition of use and with society re-introduced into it. “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (Myth Today: A Barthes Reader, Rolland Barthes, 1956). Hence with advancement of time and changes in the historical contexts, myths generated new meanings or new myths and these newly generated myths are indicative of newer values pertaining to the society. Debananda grasps this function of myth and hence weaving a series of visual representations like “The Yellow Bird” (visual 47) “Nac” (visual 48) “Swallowing” all done in the nineties and others whereby imbibing this mythic function into his creation order with an acute sense of Political reflexivity to mediate the modernist aporias experienced by a primitive tribal culture in transition. The myth of “The Yellow Bird” which eats up all the hard earned crops of the farmer gets depicted as the metaphor of the exploiter, robbing the resources of the tribal commoners. So powerful is the bird that it intrudes and nests right on top of the bow, the weapon of self defence, rendering the oppressed ‘other’ totally helpless. The skeletal figure standing in the defensive posture, arching his bow is a recurrent image. Here the body becomes a text, a politicized site for allegorizing the state

of tribal society- its world threatened by the aporias of an uneven modernity bitten by the tension of loosing one's authenticity, traditional values and ideals. The lament gets intensified in the poetic depiction of the imagery of the moon being swallowed by the monstrous dragon- a Singpho tribal myth about beauty as serenity of peace and prosperity and devilish ugliness as turmoil and devastation. To talk about the aesthetics and politics in the art of Debananda Ulup, the aboriginal Sinpho artist, the embedded context of an existential predicament, tethered to the experience of modernity and its associated polemics (the post-colonial-peripheral-tribal) has to be considered. Springing from the queer form of a split modernity set against an enlarged theatre of economic and political contradictions, it is the experience strangled by the opposing pull of tradition and modernity (and its pranks) that triggered off the quest for identity amidst an acute sense of survival angst and the shock of displacement. To delve deeper into the politically reflexive tales of the self-taught artist, the context of modernist aporias experienced by a primitive tribal culture in transition has to be understood.

In his symbolic mediation of the immediate terrain of such experience, the artist is deeply engaged in translating visual images as metaphor of the values cherished by the culture. Understandable in the cultural context, he derives the metaphors from the collective subconscious, and creates the parole by absorbing the elements from the traditional tribal myth-folklores-believes, thereby transforming them into modern myths. Myth is appropriated to generate newer meanings by transversing them to allegorical historical statements.

A skeletal figure arching his bow in the defensive gesture is a recurrent image. Here the body becomes the text, the political anatomy, the allegorized of the tribal world. In Ulup's artistic oeuvre the surreal merges with the mythical. The mythical "Bagh-Manuh" - Tiger-Man (visual 49) projected against an overwhelming cityscape, epitomize the aggressive nihilism. Thick terror and despair perfuse the air. The gloom intensifies as devilish dragon devours the moon. Soaring "Dream" tend to fall into the deep dark chasm of non-fulfilment. Even "the brother-in-the-same-boat" (Paul Robson?) bears an invisible third hand with a stabbing knife. At times, interplay of multiple meanings and a subversive/deconstructive strategy characterize his renderings. Birds, the traditional signifier of hopes, dreams, desires and aspirations instead transforms into a yellow

metaphor of the parasite nesting on the oppressed “other” (in the artist’s version). However “a text is not someone’s work, but an opportunity for the activity of extracting meaning”. (Barthes). His ‘Patkai’ series is another poignant rendering of his identitarian concern. Patkai is the mountain range at the border of Assam and Myanmar in whose foothill this ethnic tribal group of the Singpho inhabit. In Ulup’s artistic narration Patkai becomes the metaphorical representation of the tribe. At times if the Patkai is depicted with scars all over the body (dark in colour to also signify the rigorous coal mining by the miners from the rich industrial world often coming from Northern Belt of India with long standing environmental implications and saga of exploitation) at other time it is seen in distorted deformations of the body. In the series called ‘Chakrabehu’ referring to the epic tale of Avimanyu in Mahabharata, Ulup constructs several narrations about young protagonists adhering to violence and militant extremism as reparations to exploitations economic laggardness of the people and their marginal positions in the political regime. Here in his depictions of ‘Ganesha’ is worth mentioning.

Ganesha in this painting is seen as the central protagonist of the text. His iconic and monumental representation is subversed from the traditional representations. In traditional representations Ganesha, the Hindu deity usually seen with a motichoor laddu in his one hand and Abhay Mudra in the other hand. His head is adorned with a golden ornate crown and body wrapped in expensive fine clothing. However Ulup in an interesting sub version depicts Ganesha in tribal look and attire where the head is adorned by colourful feathers with one hand holding a ripe banana and the other hand holding a bow and arrows. Deconstructing the stereotype of the conventional iconography, Ulup’s Ganesha springs up as the representative of a subaltern identity. His Ganesha also represents the down trodden poverty stricken economic state of the people by holding a banana, a signifier of natural food taken by the forest people of this tribe instead of a motichoor laddu made of expensive ghee, sugar, besan, dry fruits or such other ingredients which are affordable only by the affluent class of the higher strata of the society or upper cast people. Ganesha is indeed a note worthy subversion by the artist which is reminiscent of some of such subversive work by Indian masters like Bhupen Khakhar and Amit Ambala. Khakhar’s ‘Hanuman’ or Ambala’s “You carry the burden, I will play the flute” are such work where subaltern identity is represented in a highly evocative manner with sharp mockery and layered connotations thereby

transforming the signs of the text into some meta signs. If Hanuman is burning in fire from his own his tail representing the monkey army, the often exploited subject of the nation state collapsing under the burden of service to the nation (the figure of a Saurashtriyan farmer is a double pointer), the Krishna in Ambala's text is the representative of the elite class playing flute apathetic to the over burdened conditions of the lower class captured through the image of a bending red figure with a huge sack on his shoulder. As we see several narrations and Meta narrations within the frame of these two texts signified by several motifs and images Ulup's visual text is limited to certain extent compared to them for the paucity of multiple implications though it is a laudable attempt in this regard.

Bright, passionate, connotative colours enhance the narrative to heighten the temperamental reflections. The syntax of expression and the lingual treatment seem to grow on the Ganesha Pyne-Manjit Bawasque figurative tradition, enthused with his ingrained vocabulary. But rather than the lingual/mediumistic experimentation, it is the non-discursive of the ideological, with which the artist seems to be more preoccupied. In a cultural condition where monolithic 'grand' narrative still seems to predominate, the poignant little narratives of the artists like Debananda Ulup can act as a take off point for transgression and intervention.

There are several voices which emerged in the 1970s and subsequent decades to deliberate upon the dynamics of cultural/racial identity of the Karbi tribe of the hill district of Karbi Anglong in Assam, one of the ancient aboriginal groups inhabiting the region. Senior most among them is artist Biren Singha who has been pioneer in visually documenting the Karbi life in its entirety from the day to day mundane life to the depiction of myth and cultural allegories. Both in his painting and sculptures the artist has dealt the various aspects of the tribe mostly snapshots like women working in the field, in the household chores, old folks sitting around the fire and talking, farmer playing flute in the field, etc. Rendering bright colourful compositions signifying the colourful attire of the Karbi Biren Singha's representations are mostly romantic evocative depiction of an ethnic tribal identity nestled in the lap of nature (visual 50). Mostly his lingual expression is realistic and symbolic in nature though at time in works like "The Unheeded Cries" he has attempted to address the deformations and degenerations of the nature and the pristine life style at

the advent of nihilistic modernisation, deforestation in the name of progress, disavowal of land ownership of the tribal in the hands of bigger corporate groups in a more symbolic and expressionist style of rendering. His sculptures depict the mythological narratives like 'Rangsina Charpo' and 'Ronpharpi Rongbe' in a realistic mode more in a populist manner. Another artist Ranjit Augustine Rongpi has also captured various snapshots of Karbi life. Exhibiting his work in India and abroad in the galleries like Grange du Prieure, La Ferte Loupiere, France, he in his impressionistic and realistic representation of Karbi life has drawn the attention of the Western spectators. His poetic lyrical and often romantic rendering of the people in various moods and expressions are set in fine natural setting and surreal backdrop evoke certain nostalgia and the yearning for the golden past rather than probing into the critical dynamics of modern day (post-modern/post-colonial) of an ethnic tribal identity which in term invite the western audience into an exotic locale which perhaps ironically end up in invoking the age old 'Othering' process or creating of another 'Other' for them (visual 51).

Among these artists dealing with the concerns of identity of the Karbis, Leonardo Bey is perhaps the most critically aware of the entire dynamics of identity (visuals 52-55). As post graduate of Santiniketan, Leonardo Bey seems to be aware of the post colonial/ post-modernist discourses in various systems in society in general and in art in particular and critically builds up his artistic selfhood as an ethnic tribal subjectivity at the backdrop of the changing patterns in the life in the post colonial/ post-modernist times. He critically ponders over the transitive mutations of the society with all its associated polemics, the pull of traditional modernity and the entire the dialectics of identity in a globalised world. Rendered in a post modernist lingual expression his figurative narrations captures this existential conflicts and dilemma of a diluting identity in various frames filled with signifiers from traditional tribal world as well as the modern world. Very often an iconic monumental figure springs up as the central protagonist with Mongolian feature and physicality as the marker of his distinct identity as an individual and also as in the collective level. His canvases are filled with bold colourful patches of colour and strokes in impressionistic style of application creating a space of anarchy and chaos symbolically signifying the chaotic time the artist is placed in. As if his grappling with existential dilemma and conflicts within the bombardment of multiple signs and meta signs of the spatiotemporal realities that he is trying to negotiate. Very often the figure meditative and contemplative is addressed by hands with

intermingling fingers referring to realities of another world. The hands that come forward to him inviting/intruding/focussing/reminding multiple truths raise several questions and point to different possibilities. If one hand comes down from past-history memory or the mythical world of the bygone time another hand from another plane invites to the glittering world of the modern/post-modern urban landscape. At times traditional motif like 'Jambili Athon', a totemic representation of different clans of the tribe appears in the canvas against juxtaposing several signifiers of modern day life to reflect upon the disseminating definitions of an authentic uncontaminated selfhood.

Among the Bodo ethnic group, the names of Shobha Brahma (visual 56), Rabiram Brahma and Maneswar Brahma (visual 57) seem significant. However, it is worth mentioning herein that, Bishnu Prashad Rabha, an artist from the first phase of the modern art discourse of Assam who was a very popular cultural doyen, a revolutionary poet, musician, writer took up the Bengal School of lingual expression to make some figurative representations of Kachari, Rabha, , Naga and specially the Bodo tribe which can be considered as the foremost attempt in Bodo identity formation through visual rendering. His portrait of the Bodo damsel looking at her reflection in a mountain stream and the painting of a marriage procession of the Bodo tribe are two significant representations in this regard. Shobha Brahma, a trained artist from Santiniketan is a painter sculptor who has been vigorously engaged in artistic endeavours. He has been able to create a stylistic idiom of his own, even though a subtle George Keytean undertone is felt, his figuration renders a vigorous display of strength and force. A vibrant and rich palette, with bold-passionate hues like red and black, his works are built on lavishly applied circular brush strokes. Though cubist at some distant point, the subject matter, of colour and forms evokes primitivistic and the folk elements, and post impressionist pictorial grammar. Sometimes myth and at times social realities, projected through complex figuration conveys maturity and authenticity built around certain women figuration which are evocative of ethnic prototype of the Bodo community. Such figuration of Bodo woman prototype much like Asu Dev's representation of the ethnic women can be regarded as a subtle attempt to build up a representational agenda of cultural identity. The ideological formulations based on Bodo religious belief system, local myth and fertility cult of animistic philosophy often create the quintessential substratum of his artistic vision and selfhood. Artist Raviram Brahma's works also manifest similar cultural milieu and racial reflections. His

works like ‘Jarapagla’ takes on from Bodo community’s distinct version of Shaivavad or the sect of Shiva, one of the Trinity of Hindu pantheons and brings in a different dimension to the cultural identity of the Bodos in the pictorial paradigm. On the other hand, Maneswar Brahma’s politically reflexive works about whom we will discuss in detail in the next chapter on art activism is also deeply rooted to the entire dynamics of Bodo identity politics and the process of assertion through agitation and violent expression in form of militant revolution.

Shiva Prasad Marar is another name to be mentioned when we talk of multiple voices in the context of different tribal and ethnic identity in Assam. He is the representative voice of the ethnic group of the so called Tea-tribe of Assam which has a unique identity and historical legacy of forced migration because of colonisation (visual 58-60). The so-called Tea-tribes were brought in by the colonial planters (British) as indentured labourers from the Chhota Nagpur Plateau region. One of the backward and most exploited tribes in India, though newer generation are comparatively educated and we now have intellectuals and professionals in various fields. The Tea tribes, being basically labourers, live in villages, inside tea-estates (established by tea-planters. These estates are located in interior places and this contributes to the backwardness and exploitation of them by the tea-planters. The workers, in a way have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. The tea-planters usually exploit the tea-tribes every possible way. Violence and agitation of labourers against the management is common, where the state machinery normally protects the tea-planters. Illiteracy, poverty, addiction of males to country-beer, poor standard of living and health facility are the problems in their life. There are instances when tea-planters do not even supply the life-saving drugs when workers are dying out of epidemics. The 'welfare officer' appointed in every tea-estate due to compulsion from Government of India, are mostly show-pieces than of any good. This entire history of forced migration as labourer and their subsequent assimilation with the local of Assam has evolved out a distinct identity of hybridization and dissemination of this tribe. Shiva Prasad Marar of this community of people has spoken out in a very overtly political voice with acute sense of social consciousness and awareness about the politics of identity. Almost all the works of this artist except few poetic rendering of nature are centred around this dynamics of Tea-tribe identity speaking in volume about the intense suffering, exploitations and survival angst of his people. His subjects are shown in unified subjectivity of

man and nature where nature generally encompasses the tea gardens, the Sirius trees, which are integral part of the Tea-tribe life. His work like “Tea-Cup”, a marble sculpture depicts a Tea-tribe woman with tea leaves on her entire body. In another of his series we see too extremely feeble, physically week poverty stricken bodies of the Tea-tribe labourers as unified subjectivity of Tea-tribe identity and the tea trees. He very often unfolds the existential irony of the community who are subjected to immense poverty and subsequent physical weakness at the cost of giving health, energy and boost to the exploiting authority or the affluent higher classes in the society along with boosting the economics of the state of Assam. He unfolds the greatest irony that it is tea which gives a definite identity to the state in the world market (read Assam Tea) but the people who toil endlessly to build this identity itself is undergoing an acute sense of identity crisis. Works like “Tea-Girl”, “Mother of Tea” are some of the examples of such narrative text pointing to this irony. Siris tree which is a sacred tree for the community and also important vegetation for enhancing fertility and growth of the tea gardens become a recurrent motif in his work. The Sirius trees become a signifier of their own existence and identity. Usually these trees are often used as fuels for cooking. The artist by depicting Sirius tree as metaphorical representations of the tea community comments that like the Sirius tree this community is also acting as economic fuel for the growth of the economy at the cost of destroying their own existence. Shiva Prasad Marar has also done few installations where many readymade tea cups have been used along with several figures to connote the existential struggle of this group of people. In one of his installation he had incorporated group performance of the traditional Jhumur dance of his people rendered with drum beats to create a thematic performance installation work about the cultural and political identity of his people. If at one hand he vocally protests the continuous exploitations of the community for centuries both in the colonial and the post colonial time, he also in a self celebratory mood glorifies the life philosophy and wisdom of the ethnic community.

Another manifestation of such multiple voices of identity is the artistic oeuvre of the Bengali artist Ashim Purkayastha who has been responding critically to the violence and issue of identity/ identity crisis in the north East/Assam with his definite idiomatic expression. If the voices we traced in the foregoing represent several tribal and ethnic groups such as Bodo, Karbi, Singpho etc belonging to the state inhabiting it for centuries are sagas of encounters with nihilist

modernization, economic globalization and illegal migration from neighbouring nations and its consequent threat to their marginal identities, Shiv Prashad Marar's existential experience of identity spoke in volume about the identity issues with regard to their legacy of forced migration as tea garden labourers. Ashim Purkasyatha however unfolds if not a counter discourse but the voice of the 'other' from his positioning of a migrant from Bangladesh and their definite lived experiences under this specific circumstances and its implication on the identity issue. Known for his series on Gandhi and revenue stamps which can be read as symbolic dialectics about identity, Purkayastha's solo exhibition 'Family/Families' (Vadehra Art Gallery, Delhi, 12th December, 2010-9th January 2011) is noteworthy in this context (visual 61). Comprising large paintings, small paper works, photographs and installation, the artist unfolded a series of provocative texts about the tense political turmoil in Assam. The significant among them is the photo installation rendered in minimal suggestivity, which commented on the issue of migration and the associated problematic existential predicament of the community-identity of the migrant Bengali community. As Latika Gupta comments:

> In case of states such as Assam, the problems are manifold. The borders between Bangladesh and India have divided districts and families; migrants have made their ways across the porous borders into Assam only to be labelled as outsiders, bereft of the benefits and legitimacy that citizenship accords. Purkayatha's exhibition focuses on precisely this theme. Black and white photographs of families depict men, women and children posing formally in gardens and streets. While at the first glance, the image may appear innocuous, and mundane, it is off-set by another one, this time with black cloth masks covering every face. As a device, this shroud – like cloth renders the subjects faceless and refers to obliteration of migrants' identities. ("Cry of the Citizen", p.79)

This entire dynamics of identity in relation to political, social, economic, cultural context in the backdrop of globalisation and contemporary world politics, and the very process of resultant hybridisation has been captured by artist like Dilip Tamuli. Dilip Tamuli's 'Identity Market' (visual 62) can be sited as a summing up text of this entire dynamics of ethnic and tribal identities and their attempts to preserve their cultural uniqueness under the overwhelming currents of globalisation and consumerism. 'Identity Market' is an installation performance by Dilip Tamuli with theatre artist Robigita Gogoi, done in the premise of Srimanta Sankardev Kalakhetra in 2002. In the installation several umbrellas of multiple colours were enacted signifying different and tribal

groups of the region at the backdrop of which Robigita Gogoi performed certain rituals. Emerging in the performing space in traditional ethnic attire Robigita Gogoi started the ritual with some sacred objects of traditional belief system and changing eventually from the traditional attire to a contemporary global costume lured by a strange unknown alien music displacing the traditional chanting in the background. This transformation from the traditional ethnic self to a modern cosmopolitan getup pointed to the continuous changes of the identity in the fast and complex globalised world. However in the end of the performance the protagonist looks back to her roots by searching for the abundant clothes and coming back to the original chanting of the sacred hymns. This entire installation performance was a reflection of the threat to the identity of the minority ethnic groups of the region with the advent of economic liberalisation and globalisation. Of course it was not without limitation as we could see certain generalisation of the complicated issue where the inherent contradictions of the identity assertion were needed to be addressed more elaborately in a critically intricate manner. That identity assertion and formation has many factors to critically look at in the context of a colonial subject and the subsequent problematic of decolonisation and resistance globalisation have to be seen from various other perspective like post-modernist or post-positivist standing rather than essentialist position.

IV
REFLECTIONS ON GENDER IDENTITY

Perhaps one of the most significant upsurges in the dynamics of identity politics is the intellectual development about gender identity and interventional resistance formulated by the cultural practitioners against gender marginality of woman in the patriarchy in the advent of the seventies. Linda Nocklin's thought provoking essay "Why have There been no Great Woman Artists" in 1971 or Marxist Theorist John Burger's famous 'Ways of seeing' (Man look at women, women watch themselves being look at) in 1972 paved way for serious debate and speculations about politics of representation of women in art in a larger arena and broader cultural frame. The emergence of Feminism and subsequent feminist art movement led by theoreticians like Griselda Pollock and Jesika Parker ,and artists like Judi Chicago , Barbara Kruger ,Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelly, Edwina Sandy, Kate Millet, Lucy Lippard. Suzanne Lacy etc followed by highly political

and interventional stance like the 'Guerrilla Girls' (an anonymous group of feminists formed 1985) devoted to fighting against sexism within the visual fine art world internationally. Started in New York City in 1985 to protest gender and racial inequality in the art world, members are known for the gorilla masks they wear to keep their anonymity) brought forth an unprecedented and epoch making upheaval in the realm of art. The repercussion of such revolutionary wave saw its implication in India too, though in the later decade of the 80s with emergence of artist like Meera Mukherjee, Arpita Singh, Anupam Sud, Madhvi Parekh, Nilima Sheikh, Nalini Malani, Navjot, Arpana Kaur, and the next generation artists like Anju Dodiya, Rekha Roddittiya, Soniya Khurana and many others emerging in the 90s. This new fervour of gender awareness and female subjectivity could be seen arising in the art scenario of Assam also as some artist trained in art centre like Baroda known for its critical discourse in a 70s came back to Assam. Lutfa Akhtar is one such name. Lutfa Akhtar is inspired by children art, the genre of simplification, distortions and bizarre realism. A world of fanciful imagination with forms and colours in warm vibrant manifestations. But underneath lies a serious introspection of female subjectivity, her psyche, dreams and desires, powers and limitations (visual 63). Lutfa's work has an enduring appeal with their colourful rupture in the fairy tale like representations. While in the early phase we could see such kind of primitive and child art like representations, in the later phase we could see a balanced between poetic lyricism and political reflexibility. In her works like "At the Crossroads" she delves in the pathetic states of the widows in the society as well as the women who have been victim of violence both socio-political and sexual. In the backdrop of red, the earthen pot and the women figure in white apparel creates a gloomy hoary air of pathos and survival angst. Another artist Nilima Thakuria also have focused through her works like "Beyond the window", "Broken Vase" about the existential predicament in a patriarchy and her quest for an identity of her own as an individual. At the advent of the 1990s few more women artist came up in the scene, among which Sansita Gogoi seemed highly vocal about women issue and gender marginality in the society. Sansita Gogoi's artistic discourse seems to incline towards a concern about feminist political praxis reflected through her sculptures like "She and Her Sufferings" (1994, visual 64), "After a Long Time" (1997) and "Situation" (1997). Though not subversive, in energy her works tackle the concern in the interpretative level quite powerfully. The political strategy is laid on to the body of the nude female figures. At one level it dismantles and demystifies the aura of erotic played upon

the female body, while at another level the idea of the body as analogous to the structure of the society is handled quite subtly like that in “Situation” where the female body is crushed into and identified as the stepping ladders or steps for ascending, a metaphor of the woman in patriarchy where she is stepped onto, walked over, suppressed and suffocated into the crushed, crumbled existential predicament. Sansita’s female nude arched in acute pain and suffering is of course a direct political statement, a realist expressionistic mode of rendering rather than an allegory. A pro feminist stance is evident in her war where radical political reflexivity is makes this female nude arched in acute suffering a site – political anatomy. Here the male gaze is directly challenged by the subversion of the erotic. It also challenges the very notion of obscenity. In the given patriarchal setup, women are often defined as conglomerated site of beauty sexuality and mystery. Sanchita deconstructs these conventional assumptions by a strategy of “There on you face”. That body of the women is not only a vested site for beauty, sexuality and mystery but rather a signifier of exploitation and angst undergone through ages of history is addressed in this work. The work is reminiscent of Barbara Kruge’s famous work “Your Body is a Battleground”.

This battle fought around the body of women can be seen resonating in the works of few women artist who emerge in the 90s and in the beginning of this decade. The are Niva Devi, Monica Devi, Minaxi Borgohain, Aditi Chakravarti, Syamali Chaliha, Paran banti Devi, Poli Kaur etc. Among these Niva Devi’s series is worth mentioning where a blouse is a central and recurrent motif. The blouse is the metaphor or signifier of women’s gendered existence which is a construct of the patriarchy in the society (visual 65). Very often poetically rendered these art works delve deep into the dynamics of gendered identity which is layered several socio-political and economic and cultural implications. If at times her rendering manifests philosophical notions of existential thoughts in psycho-social terms at times, she teeters on to romantic over bearing. Of course her significant works subtly deconstructs the images of popular culture, Kitsch and media driven constructs regarding women in it satirical mode such as her mockery on the popular renditions of Bollywood music like “Choli ke piche kya hai”. Deconstructing the exotics lay hidden in the original rendering of the song, she depicts the grotesque and hoary site of blood intestine and other inner organs within the image of a blouse or choli. This blouse sometime encompass a scenic lush

green landscape within it to evoke an equation between nature and women though not in the conventional sense of the equation but commenting on the aspects of life and energy.

Monica Devi's work (visual 66) weaving a distinct idiom of her own addresses a similar women centric issues and ideas. The marginal positioning of women and the associated history of suffering and exploitation provokes her. Though she cannot be termed as feminist in the pure sense of the term, Minakshi Borgohain's women figurations are often poetic, dreamy, self absorbed and meditative in nature, which are reminiscent of the Bengal School figuration of women (visual 67). Here the nature women equation is evoked by glorification of womanhood and romanticization of her selfhood as an epitome of beauty and sexuality. Though at times she has attempted to address the associated polemics of a problematic gender construction, her sense of selfhood or gendered identity is often guided by such romanticization. Unlike Minakshi Borgohain whose women figures are often set in a surreal environment evoking mystery, Paranbanti Devi's women figures are set against often chaotic urbanscapes (visual 68). Filled with multiple signifiers of the complex existential conflicts of the contemporary life in the modern day cityscape, Paranbanti's women struggle, fight, suffers and triumph over the oddities of her struggles. They are seen celebrating like in spite of such oddities and struggle with consciousness women selfhood in works like "Its funny what dreams may come". Taking lingual inspiration from Pop Art, post modernist rendering of collage she weaves up a series of figurative narrative texts depicting the conflicts and dilemma of women in the upper elite aristocratic strata of the society. Paranbanti Devi shares a similar social milieu with Raj Kumar when she deals with the contradictions and dilemmas of a modern urban female subjectivity. Her political reflexivity concerning the patriarchal social norms of essentialising of feminine character – a cultural construction, is manifested in works like "Self" (1999) where the central female protagonist projected amidst the beauty paraphernalia and other luxury items is translating her gaze onto the spectator. The struggle to dismantle the 'beauty myth' constructed by the hegemonic power structure of the society strangles her protagonist.

Syamali Chaliha's narratives about the gendered position of women are often dictated by a contemporary strategy of experimenting with self portrait. Using bright vibrant colour schemata she with her politically reflexive feminist reoccupation dissects and diagnoses, the internal

contradictions of a women's position in the conventional social setup. With the usage of self portrait she takes an internal inward journey to the self to map the conflicts and dilemmas of a modern day women in the contemporary set up of a highly globalised consumerist world. One characteristic feature of her work is appropriation and re-appropriation of historical/mythological iconographies in the modern and post-modern context. Minimalist in approach and post-modernist in ideational structures, Syamoli, in her work like "After the Eden", appropriate Biblical references into the contemporary context. She has also experimented with her visual language by using Assamese Miniature Painting thereby, constructing a clause of cultural identity along with gendered identity.

Such kind of lingual experimentation with traditional manuscript painting and post-modernist visual language is also a characteristic feature of Aditi Chakrabarty. In the early phase Adity explored a silent surreal world (in the works like "Metascapes, Image, Window, etc) were a lonely protagonist would be placed centrally surrounded by certain recurrent motifs like peacock, fairy, waterfall, etc. Rendered in poetic evocative blue colours schemata the narratives would weave up a world of dream and fantasy. But slowly she evolved into a more socio-politically reflexive mode of expression by creating certain images and narratives depicting the day to day struggle and suffering of women in her marginal gendered existence. She often uses day-to-day objects and motifs like utensils, safety pins (Niva Devi also uses safety pin as a poignant signifier of women existential predicament of stagnant selfhood and liberation) to capture meaningful significations for women's private and gender markers of her assigned role in the society. However, the surreal settings and compositions is still the notable feature of Aditi in her later phase also. Her women protagonists are iconic and monumental in nature. Her work title "You cannot be Free" (visual 69) is reminiscent of Frida Kalho and African primitive art. The only central figure drawn iconic ally in a monumental form is seen standing on earth her head touching the sky. The moon adorns her forehead and her garment is decorated in fine ornamentation. Such representations of woman tend to emblematize the selfhood of woman by means of deification and mystification and resort to transcendental tactics. But one has to consider the very construction of woman identity at multiple plane —cultural/existential/ socio-political in and through historical dialectics and spatio-temporal realities in a specific location. Conceptually speaking, she adheres to the ideological grounds of the first wave feminism rather than the second phase which became

more critical in their approach with regard to formation/deformation/ construction/deconstruction of the identity of woman in the patriarchy and their mediations and negotiation through engagement in art.

In our discussion about the dynamics of gender identity we would now like to focus on the visual narratives late Moinul Haque Borbhuyan in an elaborate manner as his has double signification as they address and cater to two distinct issues. One is gender marginality of woman and the other is addressing this marginality issue with specific reference to the marginality of a minority identity i.e. the religious minority of the Muslims. In our discussion in the fore going the gender identity issue was addressed in a much broader generalized issue without any specific reference to any ethnic/tribal/ religious group. However Borbhuyan is an exception in this genre of artists and therefore we would cater a greater space to him in our discussion.

The visual narratives of the artist Moinul Haque Barbhuyan are a series of renderings that act as a pointer to such life state of the region with regard to an existential angst within a specific religious identity (visual 70). Born in the Barak Valley of Assam and trained in the Kela Bhavan, Vishva-Bharati University of Santiniketan, the artist had been engaged in the creative endeavour since last three decades. Exposed to the Marxist social theory and to related value in art-praxis, his ideational learning influenced the linguistic choice in his art. The linguistic choice that he made was as if corollary to the postulate of a people's art – clarity of forms along with a concern for correctness of thematics. There is an eschewing of complex structure in favour of a clear and direct composition emphasizing 'readability", at times even at the risk of becoming too literal and illustrative. In fact, the figurative narrative representational mode ingrained with 'directness' and 'documentarians' seeks to integrate explicitly stated ideological belief with formal exploration enhancing the twin agenda of formal and ideational clarity. Perhaps, the artist prefers simplicity over the complex rhetoric's of intellectual anesthetization. Moreover, his lingual choice had connectivity to the narrative- tradition of the local folk/tribal cultural practice as well as classical Indian style of visual culture. As a socially reactive artist, he derived inspiration from artists like Jainal Abedin, Somnath Hore etc. or with the likes of Arpana Caur, a painter with a political voice that espouses feminist concerns or Kathe Kollwitz, a painter obsessed with the themes of war,

hatred, poverty, death, grief, struggle etc. In several representations (the 'Naxalite Series', 'Riot Series' 'The North-East panorama series', 'Shah Bano series' and others) with different media like oil, pen and ink, woodcut, etc. Barbhuyan attempted to foreground issues that concern the role of the creative-individual in our circumstances, where the scale and frequency of escalating strife are matched only by the growing apathy about them. As Chatanya Sambrany has pointed out, the task of remembrance, especially that of the unpleasant events, becomes that of an increasingly embattled subjectivity that seeks by way of its refused to forget, to preserve the modicum of sanity, that is creativity.

Although, Barbhuyan, as a politically reflexive subject, had been engaged in addressing a whole range of issues – from violence against individual to latent fascism of policy / dogma in our political system to the oppressive subjugation of women within the religious injunctions and social conventions advocated by the patriarchal structure, the main focus is to take an attempt of that perspective, which is informed with a consciousness of gender-relations and marginality within the cultural politics of a religious group like Islam. Hence, reading of the representation of Muslim women in the visual narratives of M.H. Barbhuyan is the central concern here.

Readers of visual narrative, very often tend to look at the pictorial language as subordinate to the literary text, or as a complementary text of illustration for a linguistic message But, the semiotics of a visual narrative comprises of its own distinctive sign-system – the gestures, compositional structure, perspective, colour-schemator, etc., which are endowed with the capacity of both denotation and connotation. "Illustration" – for a creative persona engaged in constructing visual narrative, is not just an adjunct to a literary text. It is more active than translation or explication. It is a condensation and affirmation of one's critical reflexivity into a visual structure, with specific motifs and treatment of the medium and the material where the material may itself act as a metaphor. In the quest for condensation and affirmation of his political reflexivity into a visual structure, artist Barbhuyan had adhered to a figurative-narrative mode of representation with an expressive element of temporality. His "Shahbano" series is an instant temporal reaction to an event that had shaken the entire nation in the early phase of the last decade. A burkha-clad female figure is a recurrent image/motif of the series, burkha being the obvious signifier of the status of

the women, and a metaphor of a "tradition" that plays terrible pranks on the "weaker' gender/second sex in the name of religio-cultural sanctity. In the series, the artist unfolds a spectre of narrative – a group of burkha-clad women in a feudal-ancestral setup, hemmed within the confines of a spatial division contrasted by a space where euphonic kites fly in the sky; a marriage scene where a Muslim bride in a cage is exchanged between two male protagonists while the Mullah reads on the Nikah-Kabulnama; a talaq scene with two compartmentalized spatial divisions of a group of frozen female figures in one and a group of male deciding the fate of the lesser-sex in the other; a man in a languorous repose of afternoon siesta against a child-woman with a doll in her hand silting before a religious text etc.

The most poignant of the narratives is the image of a woman in a green burkha against a golden brown paddy field after harvest. The buffalo that comes chasing the female figure, takes into the form of an aggressive force of oppression. The archetypal female figure is shown as about to be chased out of the field which was once her dominion, for it was the woman who once discovered agriculture! The barren field epitomizes her present status. The two frightened female figures in a paddy field under a hovering helicopter is yet another narrative pregnant with suggestively. The narrative renders a twin possibility – first, the aggressive force of oppression, where the helicopter gets transformed into the symbol of phallocentricism – an iconic presence overshadowing the very existential being of the women, and secondly, as a pointer to the cowering contraction to the confrontation with "modernity" – both in the historical and the ontological level, which is a characteristics of a modernist aporias, a case of the split-queer-hybrid-modernist-self. Perhaps, it is also a signifier of the life-state of the female subjects, the state of ignorance regarding the arrival of a 'new' world, a world of liberation and freedom, symbolically expressed by the imagery of the helicopter with its innate capacity to fly and reach new heights.

A reading of the representation of the women in the narratives, points out to a definite way of figuration, where the artist often attenuates the bodies of the female subjectivities, placed frontally, against a 'background', but averting confrontation, locked within their own brooding silence. Since gesture plays up a significant system of signs in the pictorial semiotics, these gestural bodies of the women evoke a sense of frozen existence, of inaction / inactivity, a presence of 'Lack'. Moreover, Gaze bears a very meaningful implication in the conceptual / ontogical /

historical level in art-praxis. The returned gaze of Manet's 'Olympia' had entirely revolutionized the very concept of visual culture, thereby attributing a status to the female - subjectivity as a conscious-thinking self and creative agent in the history of art, which reinforced a text of resistance to the prevalent norms of gender-typifications / stereo-typification. The averting gazes of the women in Barbhuyan's narrative with few exceptions, henceforth raises a question as to why he adheres to such non-confrontation? Perhaps, it is a representation of the real-politics. But if so, again a question arises regarding the scope for artistic-intervention in the visual culture-system. As for the exceptions, the artistic intervention is evident in form of a subversive strategy in a work entitled "Crucification". The female-figure reminds one to the radical subversion of artists like Monica Sojo in her feminist expressions. (Read, God giving birth) of course, such kind of subversive / transgressive strategies had been explored much earlier in the western feminist cultural discourse during the seventies of the 20th century. Again, "Coming Out", a simple yet lyrical rendering, portraying female protagonist coming out of a feudal - ancestral setting, where a burkha clad woman stands looking at the protagonist from her own existential terrain within a feudal / patriarchal structure (signified by the decayed mansion).

In the stylistic level, the artist inter-plays the conceptual with that of the formal. The spatial divisions and juxtapositions of different spaces speak for the multiple realities (class / race / gender / religion / culture) within the geopolitical terrain. The grid-like formats create a severely skewed perspective, suggesting the sense of desolation and a feeling of being hemmed in amidst drastically receding space, the quintessential space to denote the gender locations / dislocations. Though the artist addresses the question of gender - marginality in the context of a specific religious identity, at one point he transcends the religious boundary to render an element of universality in the narratives. Therefore, at one point, "Shah Bano" transforms into an image of a Hindu-women, (elitist – classicist type figure) who sits in contemplative silence about her own existential predicament as the objectified sexed - self. The suggestive background where some crows, enact a 'game' with the sensuous female under - garments hanging from a clothe-lines enhances the image. Likewise, in the 'riot' series, the women-folk transcend their narrow religious identities to march together out of the picture-frame, the frame of communal hatred and violence, of religious intolerance and cultural egoism, and form a broader class of 'sufferers', the class of have-nots.

M.H. Barbhuyan's empathetic representation of the gendered-self of a woman in his narratives would tempt one to place him under the blanket of feminism, by an easy means of appropriation / re-appropriation. His concern for the issue enhanced by a rigorous political reflexivity makes the task easier. But, a critical reading reveals a subtle positional difference lying underneath (for feminism is more of a garb then skin for the artist). Within the feminist art-praxis, the creative-subject takes an active part in the deconstruction and transgression of any gender-typification in visual representations, not only in the ontological level but also on his stylistic / formal level. Herein, the creative subject critically reflects upon the social (dis)orders to devise certain interventional strategies by resorting to a pictorial subversion to search for an alternate design against the prevailing politics of representation. (John Buger's seminal observation in the politics of representation and the gaze, had revealed different ways of representation: Men act, women appears, Man look at women and women watch themselves being looked at) The objectification of the female body, as the possession of the male –spectator - owner, or as a traditional site for the exercise of power, has been one of the central issue of the feminist art praxis, where the artist tried to devise several means of resistance, de-sexing the sexed - body by constructing an androgynous figuration being one of such strategies. Here the body is taken up to make a kind of neo-realist allegory as a performative presentation of the subjectivity instead of any sensual mystification, or as an embodiment that springs up in the phenomenological encounter with Nature. In the process, the representation / gestured body is abstracted as a linguistic sign by reading it symbolically into a discourse. Now take for instance, the visual narrative of Barbhuya's one of the "Shah Bano" series where a male-figure is centrally located in the picture plane as a motif of sexual aggression against a docile female nude standing before him. We encounter an irony herein. In the process of enacting a drama between two individuals within an uneven power equation, the artist ironically ends up objectifying the female subject. Likewise, in the narrative of an archetypal / monumental female nude being chained and milked by a male, he again enacts yet another voyeuristic drama of sadomasochistic phantasmagoria of desire and lust. The female figure ends up as a fetish-object evoking the conventional equation of feminine with 'Nature' (again a stereotype) whom man has conquered and (mis)used for his will and pleasure. No doubt, the truth is laid naked, but on the way the 'actual' message gets blurred up! Time delineation, sensuous colours tinged with a spectacular play of light and shade with tonal illuminations and gradations

are some of the stylistic strategies that the artists have devised to vehicle his ideational/conceptual articulations. It also evokes a mythical space of surrealism in the narrative. The exaggerated formal stylization and distortion add to the mythical surrealism, creating a dream-like effect of other - worldliness, thereby reinforcing a distance between the narrative – space and the spectator. The spectator looks on, is engulfed by the mysterious surrealism, entailing a subtle feeling of things being "out-there'', not within. (Or, is it a conscious strategy on the part of the artist to emphasis the apathy and detachment of the present world to the stark realities of the world/life?) Whatever it may be, the reinforced distance at times also acts as a pointer to the positional difference of the artist with that of a feminist which I mentioned earlier. For if the feminist - subject is an insider with an empirical standing, the artist is an empathetic outsider, for he spoke from his chosen position of a social commentator. Perhaps at times, he fails to transcend the 'otherness of his own gendered-self. That again can be seen as an account for a genuine self-critique on the part of the artist as a thinking self. The streak of cynicism and scepticism that permeates in now and then may be a pointer in this regard. But, on the other hand, this distance and detachment has endowed his creative - subjectivity with the ability to grasp the reality with a wide angle macroscopic vision. Perhaps that is why, he can give a valid account of the ironies and contradictions, paradoxes and dark humours of world / life, as in the work – "The Last Journey of Shah Bano", where the dead body of Shah Bano is carried out by a flock of Mullah wearing dark-goggles in a mock-comics stance, while the women folk stand in a remote dark corner helplessly looking at the spectacle. It may be that, Barbhuyan, in a Chomskean style attempts to expose the lies of the society. ". . . it is the responsibility of the intellectual to speak truth and expose lies. This, at least may seem enough of a truism to pass without comment." (**Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of the Intellectual",p.????**).

V

IDENTITY: SELFHOOD AND INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTIVITY

So far we have been discussing the dynamics of identity mostly in the collective and societal level as reflected in the artistic expressions either as existential mediation or interventional and transgressive formulations. However, apart from such manifestation identity concerns can be cognized in realization of individual identity or selfhood in the psycho-social sense of the term

which is the basic substratum of the lived-experience of any existential being as a thinking/ creative persona . This realization of the selfhood or individual subjectivity as an independent subject in the society or world embedded within the socio-political/ cultural/ economic or ontological realities is another signification of the identitarian engagements. Creativity – a dialogue between the thinking self and the world is but the translation of the lived- experiences into a coded text, which often manifests in the form of a narrative structure. Because, it is a way of perceiving, mediating and conceiving – a process of making/unmaking of the self within the dynamics of 'living', which again is an ongoing flux of being and becoming. Creativity is also the 'living' in and through a 'tradition', tradition which is lived/imagined/constructed, and looking at it from within and without. Hence, any creative endeavour or mode of production is but a process of participation-reflexion-meditation of one's existential terrain, embedded within a specific historical context. And therefore any creative expression entailing a narrative structure (even an abstract form at times) plays a major social and psychological function, apart from being accorded with a significant role in establishing an aesthetic unity which creates pleasure through the contemplation and enjoyment of purely formal patterning in narrative art. Narratives- both in primitive and modern contents tend to resolve individual's/society's deepest tensions. These may concern social conflicts, ritual taboos, or man's struggle to come to terms with his physical environment. They allow the real conflict to be projected in dramatized form resolved via the 'perpetein' and 'dénouement', thus providing both a ritual enactment and a magical relief. Hence expression of the individual identity or the artistic selfhood can be seen as an integral part any deliberations on the dynamics of identity. We take up in this subtext three artists namely Kishore Kumar Das, Ganesh Gohain and Nikhileswar Baruah to probe into such manifestations in the artistic expression at the backdrop of the contemporary spatio-temporal realities.

Discussing about the dynamics of identity and its ideological foundations in the contemporary art practices in India art, Girish Shahane observes:

> Most generation **i** artist has experimented with the self portrait a form of seldom seen in India previously. The theoretical and fanciful are highlighted in the way they depicted in themselves. we see Anju Dodiya as a sumo wrestler entering the ring; Nataraj Sharma as a macho, gun-toting Hindi film hero; T V Santosh as the receiver of an annunciation from renaissance angel; Ananditya Ray's alter-ego as a

> hack out of the pulp-fiction novel sitting at this type-writer; Subha Ghosh in the garb of a bandit; Atul Dodiya as a shadowy impresario orchestrating a blend of Hindu myth and European modernist art. ("Altered Egos", p.23)

Kishore Kumar Das, one of these artists taken for our discussion also seems to delve in such experimentation through self-portrait. In his video work "Valentine Day" (visual 71) he masquerades as a protagonist with a red rose in one hand and a pistol in the other. The satire and mock comical playfulness beneath which lay hidden the black humour of our present world and its dark realities are unfolded in this rendering. The artist's standing is Post modernist in both lingual and conceptual formulations because it signifies multiple possibility and values heterogeneity over homogeneity in the narrative of the text in the contexts of interpersonal relation and its implications in the concept of Love as manifested in the contemporary complexities in life. In his other works we see if not in self portrait but in a different subtle way the reflection of his selfhood exposing in and around the existential surrounding. In an untitled work a person is seen reclining in a showcase with several motif and imageries in the various compartments in the cabinet. It speaks in volume about the fear and survival angst of subjectivity in a fast competitive world along with fear springing out of the subconscious with regard to sexual and physical realities of the self. Boxed within the four-walls of limited parameter of a limited existence it subjectivity symbolically reacts to the currents and crosscurrents of the world (visual 72). Kishor Kumar Das is a politically reflexive artist who speaks in the contemporary lingual expression taking inputs from all possible sources of the everyday world--from media, popular culture, and advertising world to the art historical references to mythological signifiers and builds up his specific idiom of narration. In a painting called "Contemplating Self" (visual 73) he weaves a realist-surrealist frame with a central hoarding where few motif unfolds the complex dynamics of a struggling selfhood. The protagonist sits puffing cigarette in a way to evoke confidence to encounter the powerful alter ego which stand in front of him in form of a lion while a howling dog looks on from outside the hoarding. Edward Munch 'Scream' penetrates the lower frame of the hoarding further evocating the surrealistic tinge of existential fear, its immense suffering and the associated survival angst of the artist in the individual level which can be taken into broader sphere of the collective level also. It is in Freudian psychoanalytical term that we can see an unfolding drama of an everlasting fight between the ego and the Superego set in the contemporary existential predicament.

Similar dialectics can be seen in the art works of Nikhileswar Barua who is also a post graduate from Baroda like Kishor Das though senior to him. Nikhileswar Barua's works are highly evocative and poignant manifesting an innate poetic lyricism. His political reflexivity never hinders his evocation of poetic lyricism rather intensify the effect in his realist/surrealist settings. As observed by his fellow artist Rajkumar Majinder in an essay –

Nikhileswar Baruah's latest works summarise the predicament of contemporary living (visual 74-76). While each work deals with complex issues that an individual faces in society, the highly structured, geometrically coherent towers suggest an unnatural simplicity. Today a lot of art featuring buildings and cityscapes makes statements on development, erratic urban growth, mall culture and such like. Nikhileswar's paintings lay importance on the individual's world and how he or she copes with it. About the use of monochromatic colours, light and emphasis on architectural perspective in his painting Nikhileswar says:

> I have been always interested in my immediate environment but that environment is coloured by my state of mind. So what I portray is a mix of what is happening outside and what is happening inside (my mind). The light in my painting is more theatrical than natural. That theatricality, the monochromatic palette and mostly symmetrical composition take the painting beyond the real world, even though the figuration, rendering, perspective are realistic. In recent years, along with the monochromatic palette and symmetrical compositions, another area I have addressed through my painting is the darker side of mankind. I repeat what I had said many years ago that my work is about 'should not have beans'. The language I use makes the work appear tranquil, almost soothing. This contradiction allows one to experience the work in a subjective way rather than reading it literally**. (**"Lone Self, Solitude & Surrounding in Nikhileswar Baruah's Work Of Art: A Brief Overview,"p.3**)**

Nikhileswar Barua's lonely figures often set against the overwhelming geometric skyscrapers towering over to sky are the epitome of the modern/ post-modern self struggling a perennial battle to survive the existential fear, void and Satrean or Kafkaesque sense of alienation in the world and its constant dilemma and conflicts at negotiation and mediation of such realities into which it finds himself helplessly embedded into. His lonely figures set against the backdrop of limitless expanse of sky unfolding in surrealistic horizon of blue, green blue, russet purple and pink red that evocatively widen the distance to create a sense of abandonment, alienation and vastness, look small and overpowered by this overwhelming urbanscape. The spectators follow the

gaze of the protagonist to explore the meaning-- the dreams, aspirations that are beyond these high rise cityscapes. The post modernist self which arises out of such urban jungle and deserts often teeters on Brechtean absurdity and fluidity of identity.

Finally let us come to sculptor painter Ganesh Gohain, another noteworthy postgraduate from Baroda and a contemporary of Nikhileswar Baruah. Transcendental vision and a continuous quest to bind history, memory, culture, mythology, local, global, east, west, all these intermingling genres and categories marks his journey. As observed by Peter Bevan:

> He is an artist who has adapted traditional modes of art practice, to create works which engage with the world dominated by western notions of art, but without a loss of authenticity, i.e.: "Indianness". The vital and living traditions of India are inspirational to his work but are incorporated with elements of contemporary international art, such as, minimalism, installation and performance art. In this way Ganesh fuses past and present not only within his own iconography but through an internationally resonant language of forms….Ganesh Gohain's conception of art is metaphysical. He has a desire to fuse all aspects of his life, including art, into a meaningful whole. And although he manipulates cultural and in some instances, universal symbolism, his metaphysics are also a network of personal reflections. They revel in historical and philosophical sources incorporated with autobiographical references too subtle to be anything other than enigmatic. But this is their strength. These works truly emerge from a fertile imagination, replete with metaphor, connecting the spiritual, the cultural and the material, bound up with the logic and the humour of personal history. (Peter Bevan, Glasgow School of Art, April 2003, as cited in www.ganeshgohain.com.)

Certain recurrent motifs – a foot, eggs, trees in their web-like formations, a solemn meditative face, door frames, chair, etc – spring up like some personal iconography. At times we see the re-location and re-collection of his past/previous works as in The Table or Letter to Father. If we map his journey from the “Coffee blue pillows” in the formative phase, to “The road that I passed through” of later phase, we see a minimalist/ conceptual/ abstractionist manifestation. However it is beyond the scope of this subtext to map his journey in holistic way and therefore we want to sum up this chapter with the discussion of one of his very evocative and significant work entitled “In my Bag” (visual 77-78), where we see a kind of speculation on the concept of “Home”. And this is what we are concerned with because it is a reflection of an artist settling in a place outside the state though keeping a close contact with the native place. Our concern is to see

how an artistic selfhood is determined and affirmed by this sense of displacement from “home” and his longing and belongingness in negotiation this entire dynamics of identity formation. So questions arise--how do he conceptualize it? Is “Home” the mirror of his “Self”? The sculptural work about which we are referring is a work about a suitcase where a small form of a house is inserted within the form of the suitcase. For a subject who has experienced displacement (Whether forced or chosen) often weave up an allegorical association of self with one’s ‘Home’ the signifier of his socio political and cultural milieu and initial identity formation. In fact home is the substratum of one’s identity. We see an unexpressed hidden sense of nostalgia permeating in the narrative text of the sculptural imagery when we see a miniature form or replica of the house being carried in and throughout the journey which is also the journey of life metaphorically. Nostalgia often emerges after displacement as individual attempts to regain a sense of identity through recognizing and redefining the past. It is also a process of making up for the loss and reshaping a new identity in the newly found location. This motif of Home inside the suitcase, “In My Bag” is a signifier of a precious luggage to carry with as a memorabilia, as nostalgia, as golden past and legacy and finally as formative ground for selfhood or individual identity. The work of Ganesh Gohain however operates not only in the private arena of the individual selfhood but also surpasses the boundary of the individual space to encompass the broader concerns of the collective level when considered in larger socio-political realities of present day life and the contemporary dialectics of globalised post modern existential predicament where migration and displacement is an ever going process.

EPILOGUE

Problematization of the issue of identity whether racial or cultural was to take a serious departure at the advent of 1970s with the emergence of a few senior artists like Shobha Brahma, Neelpawan Baruah, Benu Mishra etc. From the 1970s onwards, two parallel trends are visible. The first strand exhibits a very critical socio-political reflexivity thereby delving into the questions of political identity. Here political identity is indistinguishable from cultural identity. The most

significant example is Shobha Brahma whose works deal with an existential predicament of a distinct ethnic group. On the other hand, Benu Mishra's critical satires besides taking up the issue of modernistic nihilism, escapism, political turmoil and violence also comments on the repercussions of aggressive political identity. The upsurge of Assam movement in the 1980s acted as a significant kindler in such engagement that is apparent in Noni Borpujari's surreal renderings with a recurrent motif of a scarecrow. Maneshwar Brahma and Debananda Ulup are another two significant artists who have been engaged in critical mediation of ethnic violence, identity conflicts about which we have already discussed in the foregoing and expand some more in the next chapter. However ,in the representations of the other strand, an artistic exploration in the lingual/stylistic and mediumistic/material is evident with incorporations of a range of local iconographic motifs, myths, descriptions and evocation of past/present indigenous culture. Artists like Neelpawan Baruah, Benu Mishra, Pranabendu Bikash Dhar, Ajit Seal, Samiran Baruah, Dilip Tamuly, Krishna Goswami, Khil Bahdur Chetri etc. are the exponents of this trend. The artists of this trend also have been adhering to the dynamics of identity though in a more subtler manner mostly in the lingual and formal level by the experimentations of appropriation and reappropriation to construct an identity of 'Indianness' or the 'Locale', a formation of the 'SELF' as opposed to the western counterpart or the Euro-American 'OTHER'. The process had begun in modern Indian art with the attempts of the Bengal School artists to the Tantra art to the New Figurative –Narrative Trend of Baroda. One would not discuss in detail about this entire discourse of constructing the identitarian concern with regard to the pictorial language by the Indian artists here, but discuss one representative artists of this genre from Assam who has played a significant role in this context. He is artist Neelpawan Baruah.

When Vishnu gazes at you with a macabre smirk and two hollow eyes, you behold in this subversive humanization of the classical iconography an overlapping montage. Picasso juxtaposed with a traditional Vaishnavite mask, surreal intersected with the minimal. Neelpawan Baruah's artistic endeavor unfolds a plane of intersecting forces, polyvalent vision, ranging a multi-stylistic approach --- the figurative / abstract / cubist / expressionistic / surrealistic. Recurring supercession and conflicts - three dimensional forms vs. flat ones, the cubist vs. pure linear, the apparent monochromatic vs. the variety and intensity of color, realism vs. abstraction and the descriptive vs.

allegorical - all anticipating an eclecticism in the pictorial language. The ideological and conceptual groundings may differ, but artist Neelpawan Baruah seems to share the idiomatic quest of the "Early Moderns" ….("*we paint with absolute freedom of content and technique, almost anarchic, save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental and eternal laws, of aesthetic order, plastic coordination and colour combination ….our art has evolved over the years of it's own volition, out of our own balls and brains….. our common denominator being significant form…..*")

He also seems to inherit the similar legacy, an urgent need to liberate oneself from the prevailing confusion and conformity of the local scenario. Of course, unlike the Early Moderns or the Progressive Group Artists he would never reject the very own basis of Indianness, the innate yearning to locate oneself to one's authentic cultural environ, one rootedness to the tradition (even if the tradition is imagined or constructed at times). But he signified a similar dichotomy of the contemporary art realities and the simultaneous urge to critically transcend the locale and the universal, the oriental and occidental.

Over the past four decades Neelpawan Baruah has been engaged in conceptualizing, experimenting and executing ways for blending the traditional/ folk/ indigenous elements with those of the modern western. With simplification and distortion derived both from the local folk culture and the stylistics of the international formalism of the Modern Western Art, he has been experimenting on various indigenous material – papier mache objects, masks made of wicker, pith and clay (he has made an exhaustive study of the traditional Assamese art of mask making.) - to create an extensive array of art works. Neelpawan Baruah's medium-istic exploration includes his innovative artwork on cigarette packs, match boxes, cards and his two thousand calligraphic figurations on old news print, reminiscent of Franz Klive (he has published a compilation of these under the title Basundhara). Although one doubts if these have any politically reflexive agenda a' la Hussein's 'Splash Front Page' (1991) but this experiment is indeed significant in itself. These innovative attempts in the match boxes , cigarettes packets and news papers speaks about the vehement search for the immense possibilities of forms and designs, speak in volume about an endeavor surcharged with an endless inquisitiveness for something novel and to transform it to an

object d' art. They are reminiscent of the recurrent meditative gesture of a Buddhist monk seeking different meanings and truths in multiple tonal variations in the same incantation. He is that individualist who weaves up his own artistic idiom and vocabulary complemented by a rich range of images and pictorial signs layering the empirical, aesthetic and the socio-political, underneath the formalist concerns. In the process he seems to investigate and exploit the relationship between his emotions and the medium of communication that he employs. While he may at times disfigure human or animal forms or mutilate the landscape, he replaces them with subtle shades of emotive experience that are significant in themselves and relate to our aesthetic sensibility. Certain restlessness or fastidiousness marks his vision, but that does not necessarily amount to a lack of artistic confidence , but rather speaks of an innate urge to search--. "A –search- for- the-significant-form.."

An artist of qualitative delineation, Neelpawan's forms are sculpturesque at times. His expressionistic rendering of the Human – Animal – Bird forms, the natural objects and the gestural expressions are also reminiscent of a child's art tinged with primitivist splendor. At a first glance he might appear to be working in the line of surrealist automatism, but his impulsive surrender to spontaneity and the liberating forces of a free creative order brings him closer to the abstract expressionists. Though never close to the stylistics of gestural paintings, his treatment, at times, is reminiscent of Paul Klee and Andre Mason. Neelpawan Baruah's artistic oeuvre, oscillating between the realm of pure abstraction and figurative –narration spring up as certain psychological forms surcharged with immense pent up energies and emotive forces of raw passion ingrained in his sensitive creative impulse, which structures perception and determines the stylistic expression. The playfulness - wit and humor apparent in some of his artworks like the Sun with an umbrella also point to his interest in the myth, folklore and legends of the local culture. A careful decoding also unveils a subtle socio – political reflexivity hidden underneath the layered complexities of his allegorical renderings. For instance his 'Majuli' – the metaphorical island of thousand birds screaming and fluttering in an existential vortex invokes the terror of erosion – of land – life / value – ethnic culture – identity, along with the nostalgia of something lost through various motifs like the broken canoe, a moored engine, a deserted, or an imagery of a skeletal doorframe cut against the surreal blue space. Neelpawan Baruah's lyrical renderings attain poetic culmination in

his surrealist patch works. Perhaps the best of his oeuvre is a range of human forms rendered in the cubist manner synthesizing elements from the traditional Assamese masks, Bhaona (devotional folk theatre of Assam , a living tradition thriving more than six hundred years), puppetry, folk toys etc. Blending of tradition and modernity both at the conceptual and stylistic level marks these experiments. At times the artist has attempted to adopt a subversive strategy by transforming the traditional iconography into a modern one to evoke the perennial dilemma and conflicts of human mind as seen in his humanized Vishnu. The distortion of this traditional iconography becomes a pointer to the distortions at various levels – the psychic, social, cultural, the political and so forth, in the contemporary life-state. With such ongoing experimentation he has been contributing significantly in weaving up a art language vibrant with its cultural roots in the local/ Assamese/Indian soil and creating an art with a distinct identity of its own.