

Echoes from the Edge: Gendered Solitude and Interior Worlds in Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam

Jyoshna Dutta, Mushrifa Ibrahim and Pranami Bania

Abstract

In order to investigate the intricate portrayal of gendered solitude and psychic resistance in women's narratives of Northeast India, this article looks at selections from Banamallika's edited collection *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. The stories reconstruct solitude as a productive space for agency, self-reclamation, and affective expression rather than as seclusion against the complex sociopolitical and cultural backdrop of Assam. This article examines gendered solitude and psychic resistance in selections from Banamallika's *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, portraying solitude as a space for agency amid Assam's sociopolitical marginality. Drawing on feminist psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's repression and uncanny, the study analyzes Sanhita Devi's *A Void Life*, Runu Medhi's *Freedom*, and Anindita Kar's poems, "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's." These texts reveal how repressed desires and uncanny domestic spaces enable women to challenge patriarchal and regional erasure, functioning as literary counter-memories. Kristeva's abjection complements this by exploring bodily and emotional boundaries. Ultimately, the article highlights subversive interior worlds in marginalized narratives. So, in addition to gendered isolation, and repression, uncanny dynamics will be explored in order to examine how women's narratives unearth suppressed desires and unsettling familiarities in order to restore subjectivity within Assam's socio-cultural context. The article will also look at how these stories encounter hidden emotional conflicts and set off the unnerving interplay between familiarity and strangeness in describing agency using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression and the uncanny.

Keywords: Gendered Solitude; Psychic Resistance; Feminist Psychoanalysis; Freud's Uncanny; Repression

Introduction

Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam by Banamallika is a significant collection that unites female voices from Assam, a culturally rich yet neglected part of India. The stories of this collection explore the emotional and psychological space of women's lives, thereby offering rare glimpses into experiences shaped by personal histories and socio-political realities. Geographical isolation and cultural marginalisation within larger Indian literary and political contexts characterise this area called Assam. Such marginalisation is reflected in the lives of the women depicted in *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, those who live in interior worlds, literally and metaphorically. The text amplifies women's voices from a marginalised region, revealing solitude not as mere isolation but as a gendered psychic space shaped by repression. This article asks: How do these narratives use Freud's uncanny to transform inner worlds into sites of resistance against patriarchal and regional silences? Gendered solitude is a form of isolation tied to societal expectations of women, most notably within the domestic and familial spheres, whereas 'interiority' directs us toward their rich and often conflicted inner lives. These are not just stories of loneliness or silence; instead, they reveal how isolation can also be a space for reflection, resistance, and the quiet reclamation of selfhood. As Dolly Kikon argues, narratives from Northeast India often foreground everyday negotiations of belonging and exclusion, allowing personal stories to reveal broader political and cultural structures (Kikon 62).

A study of texts selected from the anthology will include Sanhita Devi's "A Void Life," Runu Medhi's "Freedom," and Anindita Kar's "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's." It investigates the myriad ways in which women express psychic resistance through text and image. Through feminist psychoanalysis, particularly through the concepts of repression and the uncanny, the selected texts will aim to reframe solitude as radical introspection. In a context where the Northeastern voices of women are repeatedly silenced from the mainstream literary narrative, *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* stands as a monument to the archive of emotional memory as well as symbolic meaning. It shows how solitude, traditionally considered a force of passivity and tragedy, can become a creative force, a journey going inward to self-realisation as well as a subtle act of rebellion.

Objective of the Study

This article analyses how *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* reimagines solitude as a psychic terrain for resistance, exploring visual and textual forms that express women's emotional interiority. It foregrounds Assam's underrepresented voices in Indian literature, evaluates aesthetic contributions to emotional storytelling, and expands on the value of feminist psychoanalysis, focusing on Freud's uncanny and repression to interpret silence as active resistance.

Significance of the Study

This study is important for bringing to light the voices that have been historically silenced or rendered mute i.e., 'woman writers' from Assam, a region very much marginalised, politically and culturally, in India. The term 'double marginalisation' can fittingly be used to explain these women: on one side, women coming through patriarchal situations; on the other, writers from the Northeast who are more often left out of the mainstream Indian literary canon. The article, by orienting itself towards *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, puts on a platform these voices and the agonies that their stories bring forth, conjoined with both personal and collective ramifications. It becomes important also insofar as it uses feminist psychoanalysis and particularly Freud's repression and uncanny in grasping how feelings such as sorrow, loneliness, and repression find their expression in literature. All these emotions have been treated in the past as either signs of weakness or as manifestations of psychological sickness, but this work fleshes out the potential of these emotions as a language of resistance and self-expression for women with few open spaces to articulate themselves freely. In addition, this study adds to the discourse of Indian literature by locating experiences away from a metropolitan center. Much of Indian literary criticism has been centered on cities or discourses of the elite class. Conversely, the works under consideration here reveal ways in which solitude and silence from a rural or domestic perspective can act as modes of resistance through which women reclaim agency to contemplate their inner lives. The study not only contributes to literary scholarship but also offers a deeper understanding of how gender, region, and emotion intersect in contemporary writing from Northeast India.

Literature Review

The section presents a survey of the existing literature considered relevant to the article's thrust of gendered solitude, repression, and the uncanny in contemporary women writers from Northeast India, especially Assam. This study brings to bear regional literatures and theoretical approaches, including those of psychoanalysis, regional literary studies in order to place its interventions solidly in the arena of broader critical discussions. Psychoanalysis has been extensively employed by a vast body of scholarship examining Indian women's literature. Psychoanalytic giants such as Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Nancy Chodorow have come to shape the study of female subjectivity, repression, melancholia, and the maternal. A psychoanalytic reading of Freud's theory of melancholia has been applied to read women's narratives of loss and internalized grief, while Kristeva's positing of abjection and the semiotic has allowed for new interpretations of emotional and symbolic lapses in women's writing. But most of these analyses have primarily engaged Indian canonical or urban writers, mostly neglecting the regional narratives.

When it comes to regional literary studies, scholars like Dolly Kikon and Tilottoma Misra have contributed significantly to bringing Northeast Indian literature into academic discussions. More specifically, Misra has demonstrated how women's writing from the Northeast is embroiled within the complex interactions among memory, identity, and socio-political conflict. As Tilottoma Misra notes, literature from Northeast India frequently engages with themes of marginality, silence, and emotional interiority, resisting homogenised narratives of Indian identity (Misra xix). Kikon's anthropological work foregrounds the lived experiences of these women in the midst of militarization and cultural erasure. While these scholars have indeed shed light on the cultural and historical dimensions of women's narratives from the region, relatively less attention has been paid to the interior emotional and psychic worlds of women writers and artists. Zubaan Books have worked for years toward a revolutionary edge of publishing and curating women's literature from Northeast India, thus creating an essential archive of writings that challenge mainstream literary hierarchies. Zubaan collections have embraced various forms like fiction, poetry, memoirs, and graphic narratives, that focus on marginalised voices and question gender, conflict, and identity. Critical studies on the interface between form and affect,

how exactly these writers use graphic and poetic means to express interiority are still nascent.

Psychoanalytic scholarship (Freud, Kristeva) has illuminated female subjectivity in Indian literature, but has often overlooked regional voices. Scholars like Misra and Kikon highlight Northeast women's narratives amid conflict, yet psychic interiors, via uncanny and repression remain underexplored. This article fills the gap by applying Freud's uncanny to Assam's texts, viewing solitude as subversive. While there is growing academic interest in women's narratives from Northeast India, there is limited attention to their inner psychic worlds, particularly at the intersection of gender, repression, and the uncanny. This article aims to address this gap by offering a focused study of *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, where women's solitude and melancholia are not merely personal states but powerful modes of resistance articulated through both words and images.

Research Methodology

In order to investigate how gendered isolation, repression, and psychic resistance are portrayed in selections from Banamallika's anthology *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*, this study uses a qualitative research methodology based on textual analysis. The goal is to reveal the psychological and emotional aspects of women's experiences through poetic voice and narrative form. Close reading of chosen texts, specifically, "A Void Life" by Sanhita Devi, "Freedom" by Runu Medhi, and "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's" by Anindita Kar is the primary technique employed. Because of their distinctive treatment of themes of loneliness, melancholy, and feminine subjectivity, these pieces have been selected. The analysis pays detailed attention to narrative structure, imagery, monologues, silence, and fragmentation, treating these formal elements as strategies of resistance against dominant socio-cultural discourses that often silence or marginalize women's voices.

Psychoanalytic theory (with an emphasis on Sigmund Freud's ideas of melancholy, repression and the uncanny) and theory of abjection (drawing from Julia Kristeva) comprise the theoretical framework that directs this methodology. A multi-layered reading of the texts is made possible by these frameworks, in which loneliness is not only a theme but also a means of

expressing one's emotions and politics. Additionally, using a comparative lens, the study looks at how various texts create women's psychic interiorities in a range of narrative formats. The study draws attention to the common affective undercurrents as well as the form-specific mechanisms that these works use to express agency and isolation by contrasting the internal landscapes of Reshma in "A Void Life," the unnamed figure in "Freedom," and the poetic voice in "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's."

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on psychoanalysis to interpret the emotional, visual, and narrative textures of selected works from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. The focus is on how women articulate solitude, repression, and resistance through literary and visual forms in a region marked by both patriarchal and geopolitical marginalisation.

Freudian Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's theories serve as a foundational lens through which the article examines the inner conflicts and affective disturbances of female characters. Key Freudian concepts include: Repression, understood as the psychological mechanism by which unacceptable desires or painful memories are pushed into the unconscious, is crucial in analysing characters who remain trapped in cycles of silence and self-blame. Melancholia, which differs from mourning by turning loss inward and creating self-directed aggression, provides insight into characters such as Reshma in "A Void Life," whose identity dissolves under the weight of social and familial expectations. The uncanny (*unheimlich*) is particularly useful in exploring how familiar domestic spaces become alienating or oppressive, especially in visual texts where homes, bedrooms, and windows evoke both safety and entrapment. Repetition compulsion, or the unconscious return to traumatic situations, helps decode cyclical behaviors and emotional paralysis within these stories. Freud's repression hides painful desires, leading to melancholia's inward aggression (as in Reshma's self-blame). The uncanny renders familiar spaces alien e.g., domestic rooms evoking entrapment via shadows/mirrors.

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

Building on Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection deepens the analysis of how women negotiate boundaries between the self and the other, especially in relation to the body, home, and identity. Abjection occurs when something once integral to the self is expelled but remains disturbingly close. In this study, abjection is used to interpret the domestic space as both nurturing and threatening, a site where female characters experience care and containment but also alienation and erasure. The female body as a source of both identity and anxiety, especially in narratives where illness, physical limitation, or societal control mark the boundaries of agency. Kristeva's insights help illuminate how disgust, shame, and emotional displacement are woven into the characters' psychological landscapes. Abjection complements by exploring expelled-yet-lingering boundaries, like the female body in patriarchal spaces. Together, these theoretical approaches allow for a rich, multi-layered reading of *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*.

Contribution to Existing Literature

This study adds significantly to the corpus of Northeast Indian literature and Indian feminist literary criticism. *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* highlights a group of voices that are frequently overlooked in scholarly and national discourse, especially those of women writers from Assam, a region that has historically been marginalised in Indian literary studies. The study first presents gendered solitude as a crucial yet little-studied concept in Indian feminist writing. It makes the case that loneliness, which is frequently seen as a sign of marginalisation, can also be a place of resistance, self-reclamation, and psychic negotiation, particularly in situations where women's voices are socially and symbolically silenced. This article advances feminist criticism by framing gendered solitude via Freud's uncanny, treating visual fragmentation as psychic resistance in Northeast narratives.

By demonstrating how women from Assam express resistance through nuanced, psychological, and artistic tactics rather than overt political slogans, the article adds to the expanding corpus of research on regional inclusion and feminist readings. The article presents a new form of political agency by emphasising psychic resistance, which is the act of enduring, remembering, or

internalising pain. Far from being apolitical, it contends that emotional and psychological interiority can be a subdued yet potent form of resistance, particularly in patriarchal and postcolonial structures that aim to obscure the complexity of women. This study expands the field of Indian feminist literary criticism by providing new frameworks for interpreting women's solitudes, silences, and subtle gestures as intricate negotiations with their identities, society, and the place they live in rather than as signs of weakness.

Text Analysis

With an emphasis on how each work expresses gendered solitude, psychic repression, and inner worlds shaped by sociocultural marginalization, this section provides a close textual analysis of three chosen pieces from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. These pieces by Sanhita Devi, Runu Medhi, and Anindita Kar demonstrate how silence, stillness, and fragmentation function as resistance tactics when analyzed via the prism of psychoanalysis. *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam* brings together contemporary voices that explore interiority, silence, and gendered experience, making it a crucial archive for examining solitude in Northeast Indian women's writing (Banamallika).

Sanhita Devi's "A Void Life": Melancholia and the Fragmented Ego

In "A Void Life," Sanhita Devi presents a psychologically raw depiction of Reshma, a thirty-year-old unemployed woman confined within the domestic space. The narrative unfolds through fragmented visual panels, broken monologues, and repetitive self-lacerations ("I am a disappointment," "I am worthless"), all of which mirror the psychic disintegration typical of Freud's melancholia. The protagonist is repeatedly drawn with minimal facial features, often with eyes lowered, obscured, or reduced to short lines, signalling emotional withdrawal and a fractured sense of self. The frequent use of enclosed interiors, such as bedrooms and windows frame solitude as spatial confinement rather than chosen privacy. Panels depicting Reshma seated alone, curled inward, or occupying the margins of the frame visually reinforce her psychic stagnation and lack of agency. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is useful here, as Reshma's repeated self-accusatory thoughts reflect melancholia's defining feature, the internalisation of loss and the turning of criticism inward against the self (Freud 249). Unlike mourning, which

externalizes loss, melancholia turns inward, causing the ego to absorb the object of loss and punish itself for it, a dynamic deeply evident in Reshma's internal dialogue. In Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*, the bedroom, which is normally a place of rest and safety, becomes uncanny, both familiar and unsettlingly strange. This psychological discomfort is exacerbated by the room's mise-en-scène, which includes claustrophobic panels, looming shadows. Reshma's motionless physical arrangement in the space betrays a more profound emotional immobility. Her frequent interactions with windows and mirrors point to a shattered sense of who she is, torn between self-disrespect and desire. Reshma's bedroom becomes uncanny: familiar yet alien through shadows and mirrors, evoking repressed desires. Freud's concept of the uncanny further illuminates how the domestic interior becomes unsettling, as familiar spaces such as the bedroom and home are transformed into sites of psychological discomfort rather than safety (Freud, *The Uncanny* 123). Moreover, Sara Ahmed's concept of "happy objects" explains how cultural expectations attach happiness to socially sanctioned milestones such as marriage, productivity, and emotional fulfillment, making their absence a source of affective failure rather than personal choice (Ahmed 29–30). Reshma's condition is further clarified by Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Here, the female body becomes a site of conflict because it is simultaneously rejected and culturally coded as nurturing. Being unemployed and single, Reshma's body defies social norms and is therefore perceived as deplorable. In addition to social criticism, her shame and inward criticism are a result of internalized cultural narratives about female productivity, beauty, and worth. Crucially, her inner monologue turns into a type of counter-memory, a psychological act of defiance against social and familial expectations to keep quiet. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Reshma's unemployed and unmarried body occupies a socially marginal position, rendered both invisible and disturbing within dominant narratives of feminine success (Kristeva 4). Even in its pain, Reshma's voice demands to be heard, defining solitude as a space that is generative for radical introspection and self-confrontation rather than merely being absent.

Runu Medhi's "*Freedom*": The Silent Longing for Belonging

Runu Medhi's "*Freedom*," is a subtle, nearly wordless visual story that uses a child's eyes to depict loneliness. Here, Runu Medhi's watercolor composition

presents freedom through a deceptively simple, childlike visual idiom that contrasts sharply with the underlying politics of bodily limitation and social visibility. The scene is rendered in soft, uneven brushstrokes and muted natural colours like greens, browns, and greys, creating an atmosphere of ordinariness rather than triumph. A wheelchair-bound person is depicted in the painting sitting at the edge of a bright playground, which is a place full of activity and life but emotionally closed off to the viewer. This figure embodies affect theory, especially the subdued longing linked to the low-level affects of interest, distress, and shame, and is visually divided by a fence or spatial margin. Stillness is highly expressive here. The playground's vivid colors stand out against the child's surroundings' subdued tones, further highlighting the emotional gap between inclusion and exclusion. The wheelchair serves as a metaphor for social and psychic stasis, implying both emotional detachment and physical immobility. The viewer is invited to consider how desire, particularly the desire to connect, is experienced when there is no language or agency to articulate it. The visual arrangement is particularly significant: the swing, a conventional symbol of childhood freedom and motion, is placed in the background and remains inaccessible to the central figure. Other figures in the image engage with everyday activities like sitting, standing, playing, yet there is no direct interaction with the wheelchair user, reinforcing a sense of social isolation without overt dramatisation. The scale and placement of the wheelchair-bound body emphasize visibility without agency, suggesting inclusion in space but exclusion from participation. The absence of facial detail further universalises the figure, shifting attention from individual identity to structural conditions of disability and marginalisation.

The focal point of this desire is the child's gaze. It conveys both quiet resignation and curiosity. Uncanny liminality is evoked by the child's position, not quite inside, not quite outside, which alludes to more general themes of social and regional marginalisation in Indian urban life. Because the scene implies wish-fulfillment without resolution, a longing that remains suspended in visual stillness, Freud's dream theory also resonates here. In order to visually represent the affective distance between the child and the outside world, Medhi's painting employs semiotic oppositions, such as vibrancy versus dullness, motion versus stillness, and inside versus outside. By doing this, it turns seclusion into

a creative tactic and subtly conveys the unsaid. Instead of screaming, the image waits, and that waiting is incredibly poignant. Visual stillness creates uncanny liminality, playground as desired-yet-unattainable home.

Anindita Kar’s “*Oversized and Others*”: Emotional Excess and Embodied Resistance

Anindita Kar uses the metaphors of fit, fabric, flesh, and professional space to describe gendered interiority and solitude in a selection of her poems from *Riverside Stories: Writings from Assam*. Through the metaphor of an ill-fitting knit sweater, the poem “*Oversized*” provides a profoundly personal reflection on love as a misfit. The ‘oversized’ garment turns into a tangible representation of asymmetry and emotional overreach. A melancholic mismatch between intention and reception is suggested by the persona’s ‘love,’ which is not insufficient but rather excessive, too loose, and never ‘made for you.’ The sweater’s refusal to ‘slim fit’ the beloved represents the expectation that feminine love, which is frequently expansive and self-effacing, will contract, adapt, and change. The regulation of the aesthetics of affection and gendered emotional labor is subtly criticized by this metaphor.

The workplace appears as yet another complex area of gendered performance in “*At the Butcher’s*.” The female speaker wears the traditional Assamese garment known as the *mekhela sador*, tucking ‘culture safely’ into her attire as a signifier and a shield. Although it appears that she works with ‘decent male colleagues,’ the irony is that social graces conceal more covert forms of sexist and ageist surveillance. Her agency is undermined when her coworkers subtly create a narrative about her being single. In this case, culture serves as performance rather than protection; it is unable to shield her from the patriarchal violence of her imagination. This violence is heightened in the poem “*At the Butcher’s*.” Kar makes a visceral comparison between objectification and dismemberment by using the gory imagery of a butcher’s booth. The female body is broken down and valued as ‘a piece of the thighs,’ ‘the breasts,’ and ‘the forearm.’ The speaker’s ‘tongue’ and ‘fingers,’ her voice and agency, are among the discards at the butcher’s table, which turns into a place of sexual commodification. Being perceived as a woman is now synonymous with violation, as this poem blurs the line between literal and figurative violence. Since the described abjection is both physical and

psychological, affect theory is essential in this situation. Kar's speaker is both a witness and an inventory, painfully aware of what is lost and what is sold, defying the politics of polite victimhood.

Collectively, these poems reflect affective rupture through textual and visual fragmentation. Kar's verse presents loneliness as both psychological exposure and emotional displacement, whether it is through the dissected body that cannot claim wholeness or the oversized sweater that lacks love. The poems resist resolution, healing, and incorporation into traditional feminist motifs of empowerment. Rather, they insist on discomfort, melancholy, and incompleteness as ways of expressing themselves. The sartorial, the anatomical, and the domestic all blend together to form a poetics of resistance rooted in personal rebellion. Bodily metaphors abject the female form, uncanny in its commodified familiarity.

Findings

The text portrays loneliness as a profoundly gendered, emotional, and social state influenced by patriarchal and regional structures, rather than just as physical seclusion. Domestic spaces emerge uncanny, contesting idealised Indian womanhood. Women's stories use inner monologue, psychic fragmentation, and emotional depth as subtly powerful ways to protest social silencing. Disjointed panels, silence, and ellipses are examples of literary and visual fragmentation that reflect the protagonists' torn emotional landscapes. Here, domestic spaces, which are frequently romanticized in popular Indian literature, are reframed as eerie, cramped, and contested places of intimacy and captivity. Reclaiming voice, resisting erasure, and asserting agency are all made possible by the representation of emotional trauma through affective aesthetics. The anthology favors open-ended, emotionally charged depictions of inner life over traditional narrative closure and cogent resolution. The text, through uncanny interiors, affirm psychic resistance. Future work could extend Freudian lenses to digital Northeast narratives.

Conclusion

By emphasizing emotional isolation, psychic fragmentation as instruments of subdued yet potent resistance, the chosen texts from *Riverside Stories*:

Writings from Assam greatly broaden the scope of Indian women's writing. By emphasizing affective and interior states as sites of agency and self-reclamation rather than as indicators of passivity, these narratives subvert literary conventions. In "A Void Life," the splintered monologue and uncanny domestic space become tools through which melancholia is both lived and narrated, allowing Reshma's body and voice to resist cultural silencing. Similarly, Runu Medhi's "Freedom," through its minimalist visual composition and affective stillness, transforms the image of stasis into an allegory of longing, loss, and the yearning for emotional mobility. Anindita Kar's poems "Oversized" and "At the Butcher's" explore the politics of the female body, its excess, its commodification, and its quiet resistance highlighting the intersection of gender, desire, and societal alienation through visceral metaphor and psychological unease. The works analyzed in this study reclaim subjectivity for women navigating marginality within Assam's sociocultural landscape through their inventive use of form, both textual and visual, and their nuanced depiction of gendered isolation. Silence turns into a language of dissent, and the body, memory, and home become charged sites where articulation and repression collide. As a result, this article places affective and psychic experiences at the center of Northeast Indian women's literature today. Future studies could look at how such narratives continue to reshape representations of interior life in Indian literature, investigate the digital turn through women's zines and visual essays, or expand this investigation to other Northeastern regions.

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