**Mara Matta**

# The *Khasi New Wave*. Addressing Indigenous Issues from a Literary and Cinematic Perspective

**Abstract**: In 2011, the *khasi* language film *19/87* was selected for the prestigious International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala. Directed by Wanphrang Diengdoh, in collaboration with the filmmaker Dondor Lyngdoh and the writer Janice Pariat, the film was received by some critics as 'the birth of Khasi New Wave'. Devised as part of an experimental trilogy set in the city of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, the film tells the story of a Khasi youth, Banri, who befriends a Muslim tailor, Suleiman. Whilst they are both Indian nationals, insiders to the Indian Territory, Suleiman is a *dkhar*, a term used by the Khasis to refer to people they consider 'outsiders' to their ethnic group, 'foreigners' to the tribal hills and, ultimately, 'strangers' to the land. The only film of the trilogy to have been released so far, *19/87* is an important work of social history that addresses the ambivalent condition of 'the stranger' in an imaginary Khasiland. This article looks at *19/87*, both in its literary and cinematic modes of storytelling, as important authorial works that aim at deconstructing the artificial idea of a pure *khasiness*, where those who allegedly 'do-not-belong' are constantly placed in an ambiguous and, sometimes, dangerous situation. Both the film by Diengdoh and Lyngdoh and the short story by Pariat represent important authorial works that combine artistic experimentation with social commitment, contributing to the development of innovative literatures and cinemas in India.

**Keywords**: *identity*, *insider/outsider, khasi, dkar*, *historiophoty*, *New Wave cinema*

## Introduction. Strangers to this land? Of insiders, outsiders and friends

> Ethnicity-based enmity is the most frightening and unpredictable thing I have ever experienced. The man you were friend with in the morning becomes your killer in the evening.
> (Bhumi Raj Limbu, a Nepali-speaking survivor of the 2010 riots in Meghalaya)[1]

In 2011, the *khasi* language film *19/87* was selected for the prestigious International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala.[2] Wanphrang Diengdoh, a young Khasi director, musician and sociologist, had devised this 36-minutes film in collaboration with other two friends, the filmmaker Dondor Lyngdoh and the writer Janice Pariat.[3] The film, intended to be part of an experimental trilogy to be set in the city of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, recounts the story of a Khasi youth, Banri, who befriends a Muslim tailor, Suleiman.[4] Whilst they are both Indian nationals, insiders to the Indian territory, Suleiman is a *dkhar*, a Khasi term used to refer to people that are considered 'outsiders' to the Khasi group, 'foreigners' to the tribal hills and, ultimately, 'strangers' to the land.[5]

The highly politicized dichotomy between tribal and non-tribal groups, the

[1] This statement was made by a Nepali-speaking Assamese coal miner in Meghalaya who was attacked during the 2010 riots by a mob of Khasis who reclaimed the village where Limbu lived as belonging to their tribal lands. The riots of 2009-2010, like the ones in 1987, mostly targeted Nepali-speaking people, perceived as 'outsiders' (*dkhars*) by the indigenous Khasis, the majoritarian group in Meghalaya inhabiting what were known as the Khasi Hills. The Khasis, and the other two indigenous groups – the Garos and the Jantias – deem the non-tribals responsible for the paucity of jobs, the growing poverty and the loss of tribal lands. Whilst the indigenous people's grievances are usually directed towards the Bengali-speaking settlers, as thousands have been estimated to have crossed over to the Northeast of India during and after 1971 (when Bangladesh was created as an independent nation-state), the ethnic riots in Meghalaya during the last forty years have repeatedly targeted other groups like the Nepalis, the Assamese and the Marwaris, all perceived as a social and economic threat to tribal culture, ethos and livelihood. Ethno-nationalism in Meghalaya is fuelled by poverty, and the "outsider discourse" (McDuie-Ra 2009) is politically maneuvered to create 'enemies' against whom the indigenous people ventilate their anger and frustration. For an investigation of the ethnic conflicts in Meghalaya and the recent shifting towards inter-ethnic violence, see Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Civil Society, Democratization and the Search for Human Security: The Politics of the Environment, Gender, and Identity in Northeast India*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009; Thongkholal Haokip "Inter-ethnic Relations in Meghalaya", *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2014), 302–316. See also Dinesh Wagle, "Khasi-Nepali Ethnic Conflict in Meghalaya, India" (08 June 2010), available at: http://blog.com.np/2010/06/08/khasi-nepali-ethnic-conflict-in-meghalaya-india/.

[2] More information can be found on the festival website, accessible at the film festival official website http://www.iffk.in.

[3] Dondor Lyngdoh, whilst compelled to pull out from the trilogy project by other work commitments, has continued shooting films in Khasi language and experimenting with filmmaking as a new way of writing social history. His last film, *Ka Lad* (a 26 minutes long feature), shot with another young Meghalaya filmmaker, Gautam Syiem, premiered in Shillong in 2013 and was recently screened at various Indian film festivals like the prestigious Goa's IFFI 2015, as part of a special selection celebrating North-eastern cinema.
Janice Pariat is a well-known Khasi writer and journalist, currently residing in Delhi. She has

latters often portrayed as total aliens, hence usurpers of the economic and socio-political rights of the indigenous people, is at the root of the recurring conflicts Meghalaya has experienced over the last forty years. Despite the creation of new ethno-linguistic states, each of these geopolitical zones still contain inside their borders "non-ethnic polities [and] trans-ethnic clans".[6] The people belonging to these polities and clans are often perceived as outsiders or "infiltrators".[7] As Zygmunt Bauman has posited, the threat carried by the stranger "is more horrifying than that which one can fear from the enemy", because with the latter is still possible to have forms of "sociation", whilst with the stranger this is virtually impossible, as his social positioning "threatens the sociation itself – the very *possibility* of sociation".[8]

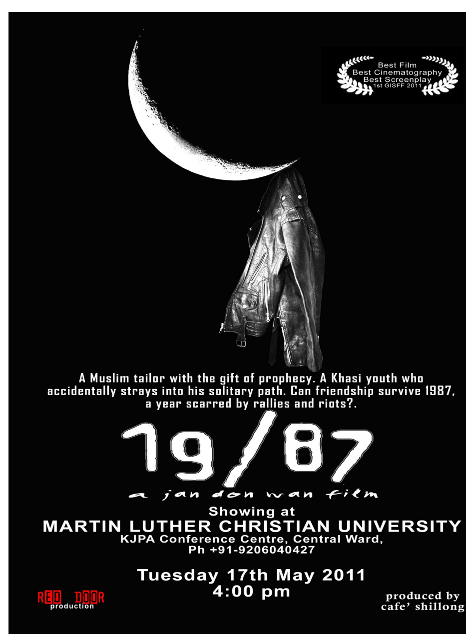


Fig. 1: *19/87*, poster of the film.

It is on this ambiguous threshold, marked by the slash in the title of the film, that the authors of *19/87* planned their work of art as a way of exploring the "very *possibility* of sociation" with a stranger, in order to challenge the widespread assumption that, in the case of a slippage of the stranger from the realm of the *outside* to the sphere of the *inside*, he/she should not be made, by necessity, an enemy, but rather "admitted into the self's life world, be counted, become and stay relevant" (ibid.) as a new friend. Hence, *19/87* takes an intimate look inside a *dkhar*'s house, in order to disprove a necessary repositioning of the stranger in the sphere of the enemy and explore a possibility of sociation with the outsider as a friend. The only film of the trilogy to have appeared so far,[9] *19/87* is an important work of social history that addresses the complex ambivalence of the stranger to an

authored a novel, *Sea Horse* (Random House India, December 2014), recently short-listed for the Hindu Lit Prize 2015, which presents "A thought-provoking meditation on time and love" (http://www.janicepariat.com). She also wrote many articles, poems and is a talented storyteller, her short stories having being collected in the book *Boats on Land* (Vintage Books/Random House India 2012) from where the extracts of *19/87* cited in this article are derived (Kindle format). Many of her writings discuss issues of identity in India's Northeast, *khasiness*, insiders/outsiders, and what she termed the "dkhar syndrome", the fear by tribals of the 'non-tribal' (derogatorily called *dkhar*), who is constantly constructed as a threat to the economy and presented as a menace to the local indigenous cultures. Pariat could not work on the shooting and the post-production of the film, but co-wrote the script with Wanphrang, subsequently publishing a homonymous short story.
Both Wanphrang Diengdoh and Janice Pariat come from a mixed family background, but make a strong point through their artistic productions to reject fixed notions of identity, whilst subscribing to their inner sense of belonging to the Khasi community. Wanphrang argues that, in the past, "Khasi Society Has Been More Accommodating of Outsiders Than It Is Today," underlining how it was possible to become part of a clan (like his great-grandfather had done, being a Bengali who had married into a Khasi family) through certain rituals sanctioned by customary laws.
For more details on Khasi matrilineal society, their marriage customs, and the changes occurring in modern times, see Nongkinrih, Aurelius Kyrham, *Khasi Society of Meghalaya: A Sociological Understanding*. Indus Publishing, 2002; Tiplut Nongbri, "Khasi Women and Matriliny: Transformations in Gender Relations", *Gender, Technology and Development*, vol. 4 (November 2000), 359-395; Madhumita Das, "Changing Family System among a Aatrilineal Group in India", *24th General Conference of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP)*, Salvador, Brazil. Retrieved from http://www. iussp. org/Brazil2001/s10/S12_04_Das.pdf.2001.

[4] As the filmmaker Wanphrang Diengdoh specifies, "In the film, the primary characters do not have a name. This is to keep in mind the number of people who have been victims of race issues in Shillong" (personal communication). Thus, throughout this article I have used the names that the author Janice Pariat attributed to the characters in the homonymous story adapted from the film. See '19/87', *Boats on Land* (Vintage Books/Random House India 2012).

[5] The word *dkhar*, which today can be used with a rather negative meaning to designate foreigners or simply non-tribals, originally was given to those individuals belonging to an adopted clan, that is, a clan that was created to incorporate those people who had created a family without adhering to the customary Khasi practices, marrying a non-Khasi person. "To distinguish them from the indigenous clans, such adopted clans are known under the

imaginary Khasiland. Rather than shooting a film which chronicled the riots in their violent outbursts, the authors chose a more reflexive and intimate approach to historical narrative, in order to deconstruct the artificial idea of a pure *khasiness*, where those who allegedly 'do-not-belong' are constantly placed in an ambiguous situation, born from the fact of inhabiting a Khasi polity and of sharing the territory as a minority among a Khasi demographical majority. "In the present ethnic context of Northeast India," as Philippe Ramirez elaborated, "identities tend to be exclusive".[10] The film *19/87* challenges this affirmation of exclusivity, forcing the audience to evaluate from a different perspective whether the stranger should be made into the ultimate, irredeemable, enemy, or whether he could be trusted by, and even welcomed in, the community as a friend. Friendship is thus posited as the only viable path to address the political conundrum that is Meghalaya today, with its recurring ethnic and inter-ethnic clashes that, as Pariat (2013) has put it, "[e]very decade ... generated a fresh *dkhar* to reckon with".[11]

Looking at *19/87* as an experimental film that opens up new venues for addressing history on film as a challenging form of "historiophoty",[12] this paper looks at indigenous practices of literary and visual writing as powerful sites of resistance and possible innovative ways for "historying".[13]

## Storytelling and Filmmaking to Raise Political Consciousness

> Often at night... there were stones thrown on his roof, shouts resounding in the street – *'Dkhar liah, mih na Shillong.'* You bastard outsider, get out of Shillong. These were the things, thought Suleiman, that weren't reported in newspapers. (Janice Pariat, *19/87*, from *Boats on Land*)[14]

The story of Suleiman-the *dorji* (tailor) was created to resurrect the memory of a dramatic event that Wanphrang Diengdoh witnessed when he was a small child. In 1987, Meghalaya experienced a recrudescence of the violent riots that had scarred the land in 1979. Arson and attacks were again directed against the *dkhars*. During the demonstrations, led by some Khasi student groups and political leaders, the Khasis burned down an entire neighbourhood. At the time, Diengdoh, being just a small child, had been incapable of making sense of the tragedy. However, the memory of it stayed with him: "The film was an attempt to make sense of it".[15] As such, it is an effort to engage with the past and with "some socialist utopian ideas". In this sense, *19/87* can be understood as an experiment in social history or, as the filmmaker put it, as a work that undertakes "a revisionist approach to tribal history", with the determination to "break free from stereotypes".

As we have briefly hinted in the introduction, *19/87* is constructed as the story of a 'fortunate encounter': it narrates the friendship between Banri, a Khasi worker addicted to gambling and fond of alcohol, and Suleiman, an Indian Muslim *dorji* (tailor) whose only passion lies in flying kites. Whilst functional to the profiling of

general tittle [*sic*], the Dkhar clan. But to designate their identity among themselves, many of them use the prefix Khar before their acquired or adopted name.... The word Dkhar is used by the Khasi for people inhabiting the plains area near their (Khasi) territory hence the common title Dkhar". In this sense, the term was not necessarily a derogatory one, as Diengdoh also clarifies: "in fact there are many Khasi clans with the same title as well. The context of the conversation or the political mileu in which the word is used defines its character" (personal communication). See also Valentina Pakyntein, "The Khasi Clan: Changing Religion and Its Effect" (2010), 354. Available at: http://dspace.nehu.ac.in/handle/1/2042
See also Tiplut, Nongbri, "Problems of Matriliny: A Short Review of the Khasi Kinship Structure", *Journal of NEICSSR*, 8.8 (1984), 6.

[6] Philippe Ramirez, "Belonging to the Borders Uncertain Identities in Northeast India", in Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gérard Toffin, eds., *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics. Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action* (Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2011), 77-97.

[7] Regarding the issue of migration from neighbouring countries to Northeast India, the derogatory label of "infiltrators" has been adopted especially in regard of Bangladeshi migrants who try to make their way to India through the porous long border between Bangladesh and the Northeast. Whilst the police forces on both side of the border are known for having committed many atrocious crimes against the so-called 'infiltrators', the influx of migrants has known no arrest. This has often fuelled resentment and fear on the side of the tribal populations, a perennial feeling of being under siege and at threat of loosing not just the land, but language, culture and customs as well. Such anxiety and fear of the 'infiltrator' has spread all over the Northeast and it is documented by the name of "Tripura Syndrome", which Duncan McDuie-Ra (2009) defines as the fear of being assimilated, and ultimately destroyed, by non-tribals moving to tribal lands: "The fate of the tribal population of Tripura is a powerful symbol in the 'outsiders' discourse simply because the tribal population has been completely overrun by 'outsiders' (ibid., 69). These outsiders, in the national discourse, are usually termed 'infiltrators'. Willem Van Schendel (2000: 33) explains that "[t]he language of infiltration first surfaced in official discourse when, in 1962, the Indian government in parliamentary debates identified immigrants in Tripura and Assam as infiltrators and proceeded to expel them". Since then, the word "infiltration" has been repeatedly adopted to discuss the migration inflow into India, especially from Bangladesh.
As Sanjoy Bhardwaj (see bibliographical reference at the end of this note) has pointed out, migration of Bangladeshis into India, especially into Assam and Tripura, has led to numerous clashes, most of which revolve around the land and language issues. The resentment of the Bengalis in Tripura has led to even greater violence than in Assam, perhaps because of the fact that the original majority communities of Tripura have now been reduced to

the characters, all these attributes, far from defining the identities of these two common, and yet quite special, characters, should be read as clarifiers of a determined social positioning inside the Khasi society. Suleiman performs as a 'Muslim' 'Indian' 'tailor' and Banri as a 'Khasi' 'tribal' 'worker', but the story of their friendship exposes the fraudulence of essentialist identitarian markers and the dangers inherent to forms of racial profiling. Whilst the film unfolds, the audience is confronted with the complexity of these two young men's lives during the terrible times of the 1987 riots. The identity label is shown to be purposeful to a certain type of racist discourse that favours the construction of fixed identities. Essentializing discourses of identity and diversity, it reifies a far from real dichotomy between the people 'who belong' to the land and the 'others', the unapprehendable ones, cast as archetypes of perpetual 'strangers' – the *dkhars*.

In the specific case of Shillong, the political manipulation of the ethnic discourse and the complexity of the migration question have created an intricate scenario. In the absence of a genuine political will to find a sustainable solution, the gravity of the issues at stake (like the real poverty of some sectors of the indigenous population and their consequent disenfranchisement) has ignited an almost perennial state of 'civil war', often led by ethno-nationalist leaders who point at the non-tribals as *the only* problem to be addressed.[16] These politics of race, as Paul Gilroy has argued, are difficult to eradicate or subvert: "For many racialized populations, 'race' and the hard-won, oppositional identities it supports are not to be lightly or prematurely given up".[17]

Polarized by lexicon and by praxis, the only way out from this dramatic situation is the invention of creative venues of dialogue, which can unveil the fault lines along which binary positions of insiders/outsiders have been constructed, envisioning innovative strategies for addressing people's grievances on both sides of the threshold.

> Are true Khasis only those who remain unconverted, speak the language (or one of its many dialects) and hold Khasi parentage? ... Surely it couldn't be as narrowly delineated as that. Even with an ancestry as mixed as mine – Portuguese, British, Khasi and Jaintia – I still consider myself Khasi and the language my mother tongue.
> (Janice Pariat, *A Gap in the Clouds*)

In order to dismantle this process of 'otherisation', it is necessary to provide more complex and critical historical fictions, capable of deflating stereotypical notions of 'insiders' (*khasis*) and 'outsiders' (*dkhars*). How can we deconstruct these biased discourses of belonging/not-belonging, insider-ness/outsider-ness, tribal/non-tribal? Can a film or a literary narration adequately address issues as complex as the ones related to identity and culture? As Pariat posits, these are far from simple questions:

minorities. According to a report, there are two million voters whose names had been deleted from the voter list of Bangladesh during 1991-95. These data have been reported by other scholars as well, with Hazarika writing that Bangladesh itself had admittedly reported to the Supreme Court of India that "no less than 1.2 million Bangladeshis who had visited the state on valid visas between 1972 and 1996 had 'vanished' from records" (Hazarika 2000, Kindle location 1495). See Willem van Schendel, "Repatriates? Infiltrators? Trafficked Humans? Cross-border Migrants in Bengal", *SARWATCH*, 2.2 (December 2000), 30-63; Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage. Border Crossing, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh* (Delhi: Penguin India, 2000, Kindle Format); Sanjay Bhardwaj, "Illegal Bangladeshi Migration: Evaluating India-Bangladesh Approaches", *Claws Jorunal* (Winter 2014), 59-76. Available in pdf from the URL: www.claws.in/images/journals_doc/2042080227_SanjayBhardwaj.pdf.

[8] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 53-54.

[9] The film was financed by two businessmen who run Café Shillong, a B&B and a popular coffee bar that hosts art and music events in the city of Shillong. As Wanphrang Diengdoh clarified during a Skype interview (Nov. 2014), there were serious financial constraints to be overcome in order to make three films and realise the complete trilogy. Even for small budget and experimental features, the costs were relevant for the three young artists who had set their minds on the project. It was extremely difficult to find the sponsors, leave aside a production company. Finally, they walked in the office of the managers of Café Shillong and exposed their idea. They were given 36,000 rupees (around 600 dollars) as production money. When solicited, some time later, to explain why they had consented to sponsor the trilogy, the businessmen ironically replied: "Because we believed in two freaks who wanted to make a trilogy ... and we wanted to see what it would come out from it!" Diengdoh's statements are based on an interview conducted via Skype and recorded with the filmmaker's consent (4th November 2014).

[10] Ramirez, "Belonging to the Borders Uncertain Identities in Northeast India", 91.

[11] Janice Pariat, "Insiders/Outsiders" (2013).

[12] "Historiophoty", according to the definition given by Hayden White in 1988, is "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse". See Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93 (December 1988), 1193.

[13] See Alan Munslow, "Fiction, Imagination and the Fictive: The Literary Aesthetics of Historying", in Alexander Lyon Macfie, ed., *The Fiction of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 31-40.

[14] Pariat, "19/87", Kindle location 1214.

> Does identity then end at borders? And begins anew beyond an invisible line. What about those who travel to the land and stay? The ones who love its lilting language, speak it like a local and understand its nuances? Is identity not formed by the tactility of words? By an attachment to a place?
> ...
> Can the soul of a people be captured on sheets of paper? Can it survive the endless stamp of bureaucracy? I wonder whether identity is homogeneous and remains unchanged by experience....
>
> (Janice Pariat, *A Gap in the Clouds*)[18]

Whilst discussing the complex positioning of the Khasi Muslims of Meghalaya, often seen as some sort of strange creatures that have stubbornly chosen to belong despite the limits imposed by codified ethnic and religious lines, Pariat again interrogates her readership with the central question: "What does it mean to be a Khasi?" (ibid.) She herself provides a very thought-provoking answer that refuses to close the debate once and for all, but rather aims at triggering further discussion: "All and nothing. It may not exist. Perhaps a person finds her identity by just identifying" (ibid.).

Identifying, though, requires an effort at mastering the cultural forms and the skills to control the rules of the game. As Bourdieu has pointed out, "[i]n order to make sure you are on the right side of the authorities, you have to have rule, adversaries and game at your fingertips".[19] This sophisticated ability to play the game "up to the limits" is exactly what allows Suleiman to survive in an otherwise highly dangerous environment. Since he needs to constantly renegotiate the limits and the boundaries of his existence, to define the rules of the game to make sure he has got them under control, he measures every step and every word, with the calculated attention he adopts when flying his kite. Standing on the roof, inside the city of Shillong, and yet emblematically beyond the thresholds and the public places of the city, kite-flyers like Suleiman seem to live in a hyper-reality where a war is fought everyday by kite-warriors manoeuvred by skilled "masters of forms" (ivi).

> Kite warriors wage a faceless war.
> In the city, on rooftops and terraces and small open car parks,
> the enemy is hidden, concealed at the other hand of the string,
> probing the sky with slim, curving weapons.
> (Janice Pariat, *19/87*)[20]

Rooftops, terraces and car parks are the only places where Suleiman can play a different role, where he can *engage*, confronting his enemies and carving his own space of belonging. Compelled to enact the part of the *dkhar*, Suleiman perpetually looks for a possibility to escape and, simultaneously, for a way to be accepted by the community he almost surreptitiously inhabits. He ends up adapting to the form of the invisible, or barely visible, "outsider/*within*", in order to navigate a space that

[15] All the quotations from Wanphrang Diengdoh are based on an interview conducted via Skype and recorded with the filmmaker's consent (4th November 2014). Other information on the film and the ideas behind it are based on various e-mail and Facebook messages exchanged between the film director and the author of this article.

[16] Among the most vocal and militant political groups active in Meghalaya there is the Khasi Students' Union (KSU). Founded in 1978, the KSU is certainly the main agent fuelling the discourses of 'outsiders' and of ethno-nationalism in Meghalaya. Whilst the KSU started with a manifesto which declared the protection of Khasi language and culture as its main aim, the group became more and more involved in acts of violence and atrocities against other tribals and non-tribals alike. As H. Srikhant writes, "KSU's hegemonic role had shrunk the democratic space for the rise of other organisations within the state. It was during KSU's agitation of 2001 that Meghalayan civil society demonstrated an acceptance of liberal democratic ideas by criticising KSU's ethnocentric agenda" ("Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya: A Study of Civil Society's Response to KSU-Led Agitation", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XL, No. 32 [2005]). This indicates that there is a part of the Khasi society that does not approve of KSU's political agenda and of its violent methods to achive it. Writers and artists have been at the forefront of a counter-discourse that, while recognizing the importance of language and cultural practices, notwithstanding condemns the narrow-minded definition of ethnicity and khasiness as a divisive lines between insiders and outsiders to the community. See Srikhant, "Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya", 3987-3993.

[17] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 2000), 12.

[18] Janice Pariat, "'A Gap in the Clouds': Of Khasi Muslims in Meghalaya", in Janice Pariat's Blog (21 May 2012). Accessible online at http://180.179.160.21/group-blog/The-North-East-Blog/3290/a-gap-in-the-clouds-of-khasi-muslims-in-meghalaya/63519.html.

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, "Codification", *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U. P., 1987), 78.

[20] Janice Pariat, '19/87'. *Boats of Land: A Collection of Short Stories*, Kindle version (New Delhi and London: Random House India, 2012), 1158.

is always pregnant with potential violence. The "outsider/*within*", a concept developed by Patricia Collins[21] for addressing questions of gender and race, could be applied to investigate the issue of insiders and outsiders to the Khasi society as portrayed in *19/87*. Like the typical "outsider/*within"*, who performs according to certain rules dictated by the insiders in order to be granted the privilege of inhabiting this contested 'within', Suleiman acts his identity of stranger limiting his interactions with the world outside his house to the minimum. Forced in the position of the subaltern without any agency or voice, he survives navigating invisible paths, avoiding contact with the Khasis who expect from him 'a life apart'. The insiders' laws police any social interaction: the breach of such norms of behavior, or a failure to comply with the expected performance of the outsider's identity, may generate terrible consequences, which are made clear when Pariat briefly describes Suleiman's attraction for Christine, his neighbour tribal girl who occasionally flirted with him.

[21] Developed in her works on gender and race, the term "outsider/within" was originally employed to describe the location of individuals that inhabit the border spaces between different groups and, as such, are positioned in such an ambivalent space that they end up being deprived of any clear membership to any one group. See Patricia Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought", *Social Problems*, 33.6 (1986), 14-32; *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); "Reflections on the Outsider Within", *Journal of Career Development*, 26.1 (1999), 85-89.

> He ought to get Christine off his mind. He'd be accused of stealing Khasi women away from their men. And who knew what might happen then. At the moment, it was manageable, leaving his house only if he had to, stocking up on food for weeks at a stretch.
> (Janice Pariat, *19/87*, 1209)

As Rogers and Hoover have further elaborated, "the more one thinks of oneself as an outsider/*within*, the more a person might tend to enact those realities associated with outsiderhood within a given organization".[22] Such practice of alienation is usually not sufficient to "remove the conditions that made a defense necessary in the first place" (ibid., 5). Hence, it might be paradoxically more fruitful to struggle against those conditions of enforced alienation (ibid.). Rogers and Hoover thus posit that the concept of outsider/*within* should be abandoned in favor of a more belligerent subject: the "in/outsider". The in/outsider is an individual who recognizes his condition of subalternity, but decides to fight back, in order to change his social positioning and render "the outsider/within a person who is *in* the organization but not *of* it" (ibid.; emphasis in the original).

[22] Mary F. Rogers and Kathy McKibben Hoover, "Outsiders/Within and In/Outsiders: Varieties of Multiculturalism", *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 5.2 (2010), 1-9. Available at: http://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss2/5, accessed 20 October 2015.

In *19/87*, Suleiman performs this crucial shifting from an individual who has so far acted the role of the outsider/within, having internalised a "practical logic"[23] that allows him to survive in such hostile environment, to the position of the in/outsider, who still acknowledges his precarious social positioning and yet acts defiantly through his friendship with a Khasi. This alienated character has learned to read volatile signs, sniffing the danger as a stray dog used to eking out a living by seizing chances and avoiding hazards. His field of action, especially when outside the safe space of his house, is full of "vagueness and indeterminacy" (ivi). He must be able to operate "a *diacrisis*, a judgement which separates" in order to distinguish "what is important from what is not".[24] Both as an outsider/within and an

[23] Bourdieu, "Codification", 77.

[24] Ibid., 79.

in/outsider, Suleiman has to master the capacity of quickly discerning a dangerous situation from a safe one, and perform accordingly. He can hardly allow himself to *be* his 'real' self, except when he is alone, in the solitude of his small house. However, in the relationship with Banri, he finds a new way of defying alienation: Suleiman recognizes in Banri an ally in his fight against racism and terror, a *friend* who is keen to cross the threshold and break the *dkhar*'s claustrophobic dimension of separateness.

Both in the film and in the short story, the life of Suleiman is mostly portrayed inside his little tidy room, where all the elements are arranged to tell us of a young Muslim man who is apparently very quiet, hardworking, with a simple lifestyle.In the written narrative by Pariat, where the images are evocated by words, we also get a close view of Suleiman's thoughts, such as the anxiety verging on paranoid fear that he feels when he steps out of his house, into a public sphere where his identity of non-tribal is constantly under scrutiny:

> He was nervous today, more than usually on edge after he returned from the market. A group of Khasi youth had followed him, or so he thought. Or they could have been going somewhere the same way. It was hard to tell. He'd walked a convoluted route back home, and eventually lost them in the crowd. It wasn't getting easier, he thought. How much longer could he... Suddenly, someone rapped softly on the door.
> (Janice Pariat, *19/87*, 1357)

The passage well exposes the degree of constant terror that Suleiman experiences as a member of a 'non-tribal' community living in the capital city of Meghalaya. The sense of insecurity that recurrent riots[25] unleash on the non-tribal community is synthetically conveyed by Suleiman's thought "how much longer could he...", which is abruptly interrupted by somebody knocking at his door. This is a crucial moment: Suleiman seems to be on the verge of deciding to leave Shillong, as many other non-tribals had done, following quit notices and forced evacuations.[26] The character of Suleiman, as Diengdoh reveals, is actually inspired by the true story of a Muslim tailor who was shot dead in the streets of Shillong during the 1987 riots. Therefore, despite being a completely invented, fictitious character, Suleiman is a "true invention",[27] as he embodies a real person whose dramatic death actually occurred. The way Suleiman-the *dorji* is portrayed in the film is also very telling of the authorial choices made by the filmmaker: he is presented as a quiet, disciplined, simple-dressed Muslim, who wears a traditional white *shalwar kameez* despite tailoring rather fashionable clothes for his tribal neighbours. His way of dressing deeply contrasts with the 'modern' clothes sported by Banri, the Khasi youth. Banri is always shown wearing a pair of jeans, a black leather jacket and dark sunglasses. As Diengdoh explained to me, this way of dressing is an equivalent of a fashion statement, a way of asserting a precise 'identity'. When we see Barni for the first time, he is combing his hair in front of a

[25] During the 1970s and the 1980s, various incidents occurred in Shillong, where non-tribals were targeted by tribals and incited to leave the State. The years 1979 and 1987, in particular, witnessed violent riots and attacks against 'outsiders'. As Lyngdoh and Gassah (2003: 5025) report: "In all these incidents, the non-tribal community was always at the receiving end. Anti-social elements would resort to stone throwing, arson and even assaults on innocent victims. The violent attacks were carried out especially in the sensitive areas of the city and would gradually spread to neighboring areas". See C. Reuben Lyngdoh, and L. S. Gassah, "Decades of Inter-Ethnic Tension", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38.48 (Nov. 29 - Dec. 5, 2003), 5024-5026.

[26] During the 1987 riots, for example, an estimated 4,000 non-tribals flew to find shelter in relief camps (ibid.). Among them were people belonging to different ethnic and religious backgrounds: some were new migrants, but many others were Bengali-speaking or Nepali-speaking families who had been living in Shillong for generations.

[27] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), xix.

mirror, he is enacting what a popular local saying recites as "Leather jacket, comb in back pocket and goggles in eye socket". He behaves with great arrogance, especially when he enters Suleiman's room, occupying it with poses of self-importance and overconfidence. Suleiman's home represents quite another world: it is like a protected microcosm that constitutes not just a safe space, but also the miniature of a carefully reconstructed lost world, where fading memories are constantly kept alive and cherished as (im)possible places of return. These are forms of a "prosthetic memory", as Alison Landsberg has defined it:

> [A] new form of memory ... [where] the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics.[28]

[28] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia U. P., 2004), 2.

Suleiman does not belong to anywhere else, as he will tell Banri during a conversation, having come to Shillong when he was just two years old. He does not have any memory of the place of his father and ancestors: prosthetic memory equips him with a reminiscence of an *elsewhere* that comes to him mediated through his father's old radio. His father had often told him that they were strangers to Meghalaya, and thus the locals called them 'outsiders': "We are what they call dkhars".[29] And yet he feels at home only in Shillong, even if amidst fear and loneliness, as the *other India* is just a reflection of his father's narratives of a somewhere where none of them ever cherished a wish to return. Suleiman observes the outside world of the city from his window and from the roof of his tiny hut, lives frugally and quietly, as "[t]he cluster of Muslim families living in the area rapidly grew smaller".[30] He is neither keen to wear the straitjacket of the *dkhar*, nor to bear its repressive consequences:

[29] Pariat, *19/87*, 1185.

[30] Pariat, *19/87*, 2012.

> He was tempted to walk up to a member of the KSU[31] and say, 'I've been in Shillong for a long time. I'm thirty-four years old and I came here before some of you were even born.' He snapped a line of thread between his teeth. All he wanted to do was fly a kite.[32]

[31] KSU is the acronym for 'Khasi Students Union', a group that has been active for more than 30 years in Shillong and other areas of Meghalaya. They are often behind the riots that target 'dkhars' and their shops, houses and properties: "Non-tribals, including tourists, were assaulted during the course of the procession that passed through the main streets of the hill station to 'celebrate' the 35th anniversary of the KSU. Shops belonging to non-indigenous people were also vandalized". See 'NGOs condemn Khasi Students' Union violence 'published on the *Times of India* (7th April 2013). Available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/NGOs-condemn-Khasi-Students-Union-violence/articleshow/19422958.cms.

[32] Pariat, *19/87*, 1203.

Beside flying his kite, Suleiman also wants to go beyond that definition that has frozen him in the ambivalent condition of the 'stranger'. As Pariat describes in the story, the Khasis come by to have new dresses made by the *dorji,* or old ones fixed. They call him simply *dorji*, 'tailor', and never address him with his proper name. He is a shadowy presence to be kept at a distance, an invisible someone who belongs to the realm of the *outside*, a condition which adds to his loneliness and sense of a life apart:

> Despite the small town he lived in ripping itself apart, people, outsiders or not, still dropped by to have things mended. Although that was all they did. Especially the Khasis.[33]

[33] Pariat, *19/87*, Kindle location 1190.

As he works at his sewing machine, Suleiman often gazes outside the window, leaving his thoughts free to fly, like his kite, from the depths of anger and frustration for having being turned into an 'outsider' in his own land, to the sweet realms of romance when his eyes meet the figure of Christine. But anger and frustration seem to be more acute and present than the romantic dreams of love he interrupts as quickly as they emerge, snapping off a loose thread with his teeth.

Interestingly, the character of Christine – only mentioned once in the short story by Pariat – is completely absent in the film, a choice that Wanphrang Diengdoh describes as absolutely conscious and deliberate: "I just don't feel in the position to have a woman on film, to really understand the position of a tribal woman in the tribal society".[34] He thus preferred to leave female characters out of the frame of *19/87*, in order to focus the attention on the relationship between Banri and Suleiman, a tribal and a non-tribal, as possible friends in a political environment where such a bond is constructed as unlikely, undesirable, almost *impossible*.

[34] In a very interesting personal communication, the filmmaker Diengdoh further pointed out: "Also, the film being produced by people who were not really film producers, allowed me to say exactly what I wanted without bending down perhaps to the pressures of commissioned editors. The idea that India was soon entering into a Neo liberal market in the next 3 years and looking at how "tribal" spaces would now have their demography more defined on economic lines was something I was keen to look into. I did not want to romanticise the idea of these two characters finding comfort 'oh so easily' in some unattainable tangible love but stress more on how 'market spaces' are essentially aggressive spaces where the need to foster bonds also creates oppositions. And this is what is interesting that commerce or a desire to speculate in markets (which is what *teer* is at its essence- betting) can either bring people together or make them enemies".

The friendship that slowly and unpredictably matures between the two young characters shows a virtual trespassing of the borderline that normally cuts Suleiman off from the local community as a stranger. It is in the casual encounter with Banri, first as an unwelcomed customer who invades Suleiman's shop to request a service, then as an imposed guest whose expectations Suleiman has to do his best to satisfy, then as an acquaintance who comes by from time to time, and finally as a 'friend' with whom Suleiman spends a night drinking, chatting and sharing dreams and fears. This last shifting of the relationship constitutes the turning point of the film and the short story alike. In Pariat's story, the two young men are shown sharing a simple meal, drinking some alcohol and listening to an old radio, which Suleiman has inherited from his father, a little souvenir of a far-away India that reaches them only through the cracks of the radio's old loudspeakers and some Hindi songs. They strike up a conversation:

> Banri: 'From where did you come?'
>
> Suleiman: 'Lucknow... in Uttar Pradesh. You know where that is?
>
> Banri: 'Yes, of course. Near Bihar. Now drink.' Banri slugged his alcohol like most other hardened drinkers in town. A few quick, neat gulps.
>
> Suleiman followed, albeit slower.
>
> Banri: 'You came so long ago... why didn't you go back?'
>
> Suleiman: 'My father didn't want to. He said our old hometown was filled with sad memories, and this was a fresh, new start.' He took a sip. 'My mother died when I was born.'
>
> Banri: 'Ei, sorry to hear that.'
>
> Suleiman shrugged. 'I didn't know her at all. I didn't even miss her.'

> Banri: 'You've been around here longer than me.' Banri poured himself a refill.
>
> Suleiman: 'That might be true but it makes no difference; people still throw stones at my house.' Suleiman gulped his drink. His eyes were slightly glazed. 'They call me all sorts of names... bastard outsider.'[35]

[35] Pariat, *19/87*, 1391.

The scene takes a very intimate take in the film, as Banri becomes tipsy and starts pouring out words accompanied by generous refills of alcohol. It is at this moment that he, as the local tribal entitled to belong, addresses the question of identity and the violent politics that surround it. Banri confesses his unwillingness at targeting 'outsiders' as a legitimate or even useful way of addressing tribal grievances over lack of jobs and loss of land:

> [Banri, talking about Khasi Student Union]: 'People keep asking me why I don't join KSU...that it's a cause for our tribe. They think... I see it in their eyes when they look at me... they think if I don't then somehow I'm not a real Khasi, you know? He shrugged. 'I mean I see their point and all – we don't own any businesses here, or hold important government positions... but I don't know,' – he struggled with his words – 'if this is the right way... fighting, *beh dkhar*... chasing outsiders out of Shillong.' He pointed his glass at Suleiman.[36]

[36] Pariat, *19/87*, 1412.

The conversation reaches a climax: the ambiguity of their situation, which casts both of them as virtual enemies to each other, is resolved by the realization that they share more than they had imagined. Most of all, they cherish the same love for the city of Shillong, this invisible but very present character of the narrative. Shillong is like a beautiful woman they both love and dream about, 'protected' by self-appointed guardians of her virtues who impede her lovers to be with her. When Banri asks Suleiman why he simply does not go back, since he has *another* place to call home, Suleiman states that there is no other place to go back and to call home. There is no land where to return: the people who have been forced to leave their houses have landed in relief camps, no-man's lands that can hardly be made into a home. Suleiman, as much as Banri, considers Shillong his own city, and Meghalaya his own land:

> The tailor struck a match and lit his *beedi*. 'That's the problem. I don't really have anywhere to go. I was two when we came to Shillong. I thought it was the most beautiful place on earth.'
>
> Banri: 'It is.'
>
> For a while they sat in silence and smoked.[38]

[38] Pariat, *19/87*, 1417.

Banri, made perhaps more sensitive and sympathetic to the plight of Suleiman by realising his own sense of helplessness and lack of choice, remains silent. The night swallows their pain and their frustration, bringing them close to each other in the realisation that both live quite alienated lives that do not acquire any more

meaning in embracing a rigid and artificial identity mask. Through the birth of their friendship, however, something seems to be almost overcome: the complete sense of loneliness and apartness that they had experienced so far seems to dissolve as dew at the first lights of the sunshine. In the morning, we see Banri happily strolling the lanes of Shillong, searching for Suleiman to tell him he has won betting the numbers that Suleiman suggested him to play. As the camera pans, we see Suleiman cheerfully playing with his kite on a roof. The film ends with a symbolic shot of Banri extending his hand to Suleiman and asking him to join him for a meal. Suleiman, in return, extends his hand and the frame is frozen, followed by images of the two friends eating together, whilst superimposed images of the riots, as reported on the Indian newspapers, tinge their cheerful faces with red colour and remind the viewers of the tragedy that still looms on Shillong.

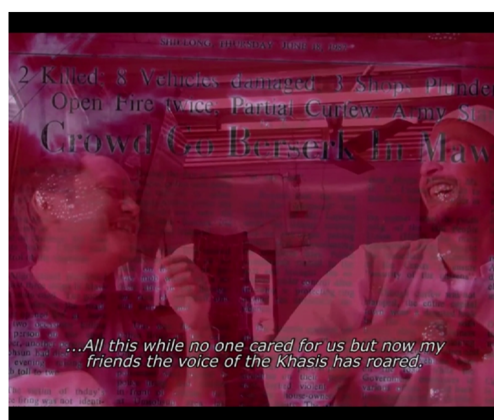


Fig. 2: A still from the film *19/87*.

Janice Pariat, describing the same final scenes, gives us an introspective insight into Suleiman's mind. He is indulging in his favourite activity: playing with his kite on the roof of his house. The fear and the anger seem to recede as he leaves his thoughts to follow the movements of his dancing kite:

> He remembered something his father once told him, that the kite held the soul of the person who flew it. 'What does than mean, abba?' he'd asked, and his father had replied, 'What you feel flows through the string.'[39]

[39] Pariat, *19/87*, 1458.

Suleiman is still dizzy from the night before, his kite is still uncertain and he perhaps feels not completely at ease in his new dimension of 'friend'. But then, confined as he is to the little square ground of the roof, "while kites prowled above him like birds of prey", Suleiman decides to give hope a chance and fights back:

> [T]his time, helped by a nifty breeze, the kite lifted. Soon, it was swooping through the air like a delighted bird. He laughed. Perhaps this is what his father

> had meant – that the kite mimicked his gladness. It flew higher, leaving the rest behind. Some of the smaller kites challenged him to a duel, but the battles didn't last more than a few minutes. He was invincible. Finally, a large kite rose in the air and swirled around his.[40]

[40] Pariat, *19/87*, 1468.

This is the decisive battle: the large kite, perhaps a symbol of his biggest fear, looks threatening as ever, but this time Suleiman is not doomed to give up so easily as he is equipped with a new weapon: friendship. He chases the giant kite until "with some luck, he pulled and a line snapped, the other kite dropped".

Suleiman brings his own kite down, "fluttering like a breathless bird". The town in front of him looks "coy and peaceful". This is the moment when Banri arrives and calls him to descend from the roof and go to eat something to a "good Muslim restaurant". Pariat describes for a moment the fearful thoughts of Suleiman about walking around Shillong in a day when a rally had been announced. Would he be able to win, in a real battle not consigned to his brave and valiant kite? The stretched hand of Banri is perhaps what convinces him to descend from the roof:

> How long could it go? And this evening, for some reason, he felt as though the town was his own.... He was ready, even in the smallest possible way, to reclaim it.
>
> That night, before going to bed, Suleiman once again climbed to the roof. Without his kite....[41]

[41] Pariat, *19/87*, 1490.

Suleiman is still aware of the possible dangers, but he seems determined to face them from a different "positionality":[42] he has shifted from the alienated social positioning of an 'outsider/within' to that of a more hopeful and resilient 'in/outsider', thanks to the more intimate place he has acquired in the Khasi community: the place of a 'friend'.

[42] I adopt the word 'positionality' in the way Floya Anthias has designated it, as a concept that "addresses issues of identity in terms of locations which are not fixed but are context, meaning and time related and which therefore involve shifts and contradictions" (2008: 5). As Anthias elaborated, such "intersectional frame ... moves away from the idea of given 'groups' or 'categories' of gender, ethnicity and class, which then intersect ... and instead pays much more attention to *social locations and processes* which are broader than those signalled by this" (ibid.) The concept of positionality adds complexity to issues of collective identity construction, unpacking the intersectional dimensions of particular social positionings and the "narratives of location" that sustain them. Floya Anthias, "Thinking Through the Lens of Translocational Positionality: an Intersectionality Frame for Understanding Identity and Belonging", *Translocations,* Vol. 4, Issue 1 (Winter 2008), 5-20. See also Floya Anthias, "Where Do I belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality", *Ethnicities*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2002), 491-515.

## Indigenous New Waves: Film and Literature as Social History

Based on historical events and verisimilar characters, *19/87* is a film that can be placed at the crossroads between fiction and documentary, where a reappraisal of the past is tried out through an *invented* story of a *real* fact. Well received both at festivals outside the region and during the various screenings held in Shillong, the film has been considered by some critics and journalists as "the birth of the Khasi New Wave":

> [W]e take great pride in announcing ... the birth of Khasi New Wave. Khasi New Wave draws inspiration from stories of the streets, depicting Shillong as it really is or was without omitting the unpleasant side of this beautiful hill station.[43]

[43] See the official website of the film trilogy at the URL: www.shillongtrilogy.com.

Whilst the authors of the film did not consciously devise it to be a 'new wave'

work, Diengdoh acknowledges that *19/87* is indeed very different from the rest of the Khasi cinema. Admitting that it presents a *new way* of making cinema in the Khasi language – as opposed to the majority of the films produced in Meghalaya, which mostly try to imitate Bollywood – *19/87* "speaks another kind of truth", as it exploits to its advantage the richness of Khasi imagery, exploring the way different cultures read and interpret visual images.

Whether we wish to consider it as a film suffused by the ethos of the Nouvelle Vague, or rather see it as an oppositional, alternative way of conceiving the role of the feature film genre in the land of Bollywood, what remains unquestionable is the dimension of innovation and the degree of experimentation that its author Diengdoh contributed to the debate on indigenous filmmaking from Northeast India. As Rosenstone has posited when discussing the "opposition or innovative historical" films,

> [These works] are, at the same time, part of a search for a new vocabulary in which to render the past on the screen, an effort to make history (depending upon the film) more complex, interrogative, and self-conscious, a matter of tough, even unanswerable questions rather than of slick stories. The best of these films propose new strategies for dealing with the traces of the past, strategies that point towards new forms of historical thought, forms that need not be limited to the screen, but might, with necessary alterations due to the medium, be carried back to the printed page.[44]

[44] Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History*, 20.

Albeit navigating complex cultural and linguistic landscapes, indigenous films and literatures contribute significantly to this quest for a new vocabulary, creating new ways of writing the past through experimental formats that can be regarded as new waves in the production of critical historical thought. The filmic and written texts of *19/87* are narratives which, despite the intervention of the artists' imagination (or perhaps thanks to it), put forward "new strategies for dealing with the traces of the past" (ibid.). In doing so, these literary and cinematic narrations pave alternative paths to re-apprehend history, recurring to the tradition of orality and to ancient modes of storytelling in order to create, via new media, challenging and innovative forms of grassroots historiography and "historiophoty" (White 1988).

On India's specific engagement with social history and experimental filmmaking, Anirudh Deshpande[45] has elaborated:

[45] Anirudh Deshpande, *Class, Power & Consciousness in Indian Cinema & Television* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2009), 66.

> [A] 'new wave' film without being a 'period' film often becomes an excellent example of a historical film. Recreation of human feelings in realistic social situations – like the ones involving the exercise of power and exploitation – is more important to these films than a 'period' look. However this does not mean that the directors of these films do not pay adequate attention to historical details.

Further debating whether or not we should consider *19/87* as the 'birth of the Khasi New Wave' since there was no manifesto as such that the authors subscribed to while devising and shooting the film, it could be important to underline how the new waves in cinema have become a global phenomenon, currently under scrutiny by scholars of cultural and media studies. James Tweedie, in his recent work *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*, has argued:

> The proliferation of new waves on the international art house and film festival circuits is one of the few cinematic phenomena from the past half century with a global reach that rivals the geographic range and ambition of Hollywood.... [T]hese movements are best understood not as isolated events but as a series of interlaced moments, as an alternative vision of global modernity, and as an opening onto the "world" promised in the phrase "world cinema." The new waves surface as one dimension of the visual culture of accelerated modernization, and they accompany a sequence of urban, youth, and consumer revolutions whose universe of reference points and comparisons inevitably extends beyond national frontiers.[46]

[46] James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013), 1-2.

Therefore, if it is true that neither the filmmaker nor the writer of *19/87* had made conscious references to the films of Truffaut or Godard, with Diengdoh's camera work being mostly guided by his fascination with the anarchist ideas of Bakunin, it must nevertheless be affirmed that the definition of 'Khasi New Wave' can be adopted for *19/87*. As the filmmaker himself admitted, his film is a work "that speaks another kind of truth" or, paraphrasing Tweedie's words on the global new waves, it is an "insurgency devoted to the representation of the modern and the real". Certain artistic choices operated by Wanphrang and his team can be paralleled to the ones made more than fifty years ago in Paris by the directors and auteurs involved in the Nouvelle Vague, since this movement, like its global counterparts nowadays,

> represented a break in filmmaking practice at the turn of the 1960s, introducing new ways of making films outside the mainstream industry, spreading the use of lighter technologies, ushering in an entire new generation of directors, stars, cinematographers, producers, and composers. It also significantly revolutionized the way people saw films and the way they wrote about them, in particular popularizing the *politique des auteurs*.[47]

[47] Ginette Vincendeau, "IN FOCUS: The French New Wave at Fifty Pushing the Boundaries", *Cinema Journal*, 49.4 (2010), 135.

Directors like Truffaut and Godard intervened in the intellectual debate of the moment, in an effort "to grasp and represent inevitable historical change ... while still retaining control of the production and aesthetic process".[48] This helps us to understand why *19/87* was celebrated as the beginning of a 'movement' that distinguished itself in many ways from the previously produced Khasi films, an industry relatively young (the first film was made in 1982) and yet already shadowed by the starlight of the Bollywood blockbusters.

[48] Ibid., 138.

*19/87* challenges both the conventional form of the mainstream Hindi feature film, with its reliance on the song and dance sequences, and the traditional story-plot, typified by either the action movie or the melodramatic genre. Watching *19/87*, we are not swept into a magic realm, nor do we voyeuristically indulge in sensual dances or heroic actions. There are neither heroes nor villains, but common men, *real* characters who are presented through delicate touches of light, sketches of day-to-day life, realistic sequences and intimate shots which contradict the mainstream format of the Bollywood hits. As Hill posited for the French New Wave directors, the work of these Khasi artists, too, is that of "primary creators, authors, auteurs (which ideally meant writer-directors) of their films".[49] *Moreover, 19/87* presents itself as a new wave film for its "form of 'imperfect cinema' whose material poverty becomes a marker of its more direct engagement with the reality of the postcolonial condition".[50] It is the product of "a hybrid ... contaminated cultural category" (ibid.) that belongs to the realm of art cinema, displaying the historical specificities of its local place and time of birth, whilst engaging with similar cultural trends in the global mediascapes.[51]

The actors, also crew-members as is often the case in low-budget enterprises, are non-professionals, local youths engaged in a performance of collective re-enactment of their own lives and histories. The goal they strive to achieve is the debunking of stereotypes which nurture violent forms of ethno-nationalism. Acknowledging that everything is a 'misapprehension', they seem to subscribe to the idea that stories, like histories, can be told from multiple perspectives and with different innuendos, without ever betraying the quest for truth.

As Alun Munslow has pointed out, textual historical representations are also "invented, directed and produced as any film".[52] What textual and visual narratives of historical events have in common, Munslow argues, is that both "are ... metonymic narrative devices with the film director/producer making as many (and similar) narrative choices as any historian does" (ibid.). This resonates with what Robert Rosenstone has been claiming since the end of the 1980s:[53] the visual media, and the dramatic feature in particular, can provide many insights into the historical truth(s) of the past, without impinging on 'factuality' as such, since all narrations, including historical writings, are ultimately "constructions".

The filmic and literary narrations of the turmoil that hit Shillong in 1987, whilst avoiding violent scenes of the riots, take a look into the life of a Khasi and a Muslim tailor, electing them as representatives of the groups that confronted each other during those terrible days, albeit avoiding the pretence of presenting an accurate account of the facts as they *really* unfolded. The authors of *19/87* rather try to 'make sense' of a terrible (and recurring) event, searching for new meanings and innovative solutions. In so doing, *19/87* poses a challenge to the biased representations of the local histories, bringing into focus those hidden (hi)stories often erased in the program of ethno-nationalist constructions of identity and related claims of belonging.

[49] Rodney Hill, "New Wave Meets the Tradition of Quality: Jacques Demy's The Umbrellas of Cherbourg", *Cinema Journal*, 48.1, 27-50.

[50] James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2013), 1-2.

[51] The term was coined by Arjun Appadurai, who named 'mediascapes' some "landscapes of images" that "provide (especially in their television, film and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and 'ethnoscapes' to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of 'news' and politics are profoundly mixed". As Appadurai further highlights, "[t]he lines between the 'realistic' and the fictional landscapes [the audiences] see are blurred..." so that, in the end, what the spectators see are nothing more than constructed "imagined' worlds". See Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds., *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords,* Revised Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 590.

[52] Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 67.

[53] Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film", *The American Historical Review*, 93.5 (1988), 1173-1185; *Visions of the Past. The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard U. P., 1995); "The Historical Film as Real History", in Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. P., 2000), 50-66; *History on Film, Film on History.*

Whilst avoiding the pitfalls of ethnic, religious or cultural radicalization, whose manifestation is often just crude violence against non-tribals, indigenous writers, filmmakers, musicians, and artists are trying to reflect on the reasons behind this conundrum and the paths that could be taken in order to favour a climate of peaceful and constructive dialogue with all parties involved. Engaging in an analysis of grassroots realities, rather than relying on simplistic historical renderings of 'facts', one of the biggest challenges of the New Wave emerging from Northeast India is that of re-presenting the past, narrating alternative histories and *un*-making forged differences, whilst acknowledging the complexity of layered identities that are constantly caught – and transformed – in the historical flow.

## Conclusion

Who is a real insider? Who is a complete stranger? What if, by an historical accident, somebody shifts from being an 'outsider/*within'* to being an 'in/outsider', an individual who has claims on the right to belong to a place even if he may be not indigenous? Can an outsider ever become an insider without turning into an enemy? Can friendship become a viable path of reconciliation where "those creatures who are indeterminate from the point of view of the dominant division"[54] can be welcomed inside the group?

These are just some of the questions that the story of *19/87* has raised, without the ambition of providing any definitive solution, but with the wish of presenting possible *new ways/new waves* to tackle, through cinema and literature, the issues of representational practices and identity politics in Meghalaya.

The story ends on a personal reflection by Suleiman, again sitting on the roof of his hut and looking at a sky full of stars, with no kites to fight:

> A strong, brief wind rustled the leaves of the guava tree,
> somewhere echoed the empty clank of a loose tin sheet.
> Another day, he thought, another day is what the future is built on.
> He looked up.
> The sky, emptied of kites and wires,
> had unrevealed and was full of stars.[55]

*19/87*, both in its literary and filmic renditions, can be taken as an exemplary case of experimentation with storytelling at the crossroads between fiction and history, a slippery terrain of investigation where imagination and reality are contested, discussed and readdressed in order to offer alternative and layered readings of the past. The story of Banri and Suleiman aimed at portraying a place of creative encounter and of production of new "epistemic modalities"[56] that can challenge the passive reception of a biased and univocal retelling of historical facts, which usually erases the dkhars' voices from the master narrative of indigenous history. Hence, the Khasi New Wave's auteurs preside over this world of

[54] Bordieu, "Codification", 82.

[55] Pariat, *19/87*, Kindle location 1500.

[56] According to the scholar of linguistics Jan Nuyts: "[E]pistemic modality concerns an estimation of the likelihood that (some aspect of) a certain state of affairs *is/has been/will be true (or false)* in the context of the possible world under consideration. This estimation of likelihood is situated on a scale going from certainty that the state of affairs applies, via a neutral or agnostic stance towards its occurrence, to certainty that it does not apply, with intermediary positions on the positive and the negative sides of the scale" (Jan Nuyts *Epistemic Modality, Language, and Conceptualization: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Perspective* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 21-22. For a critique and a reappraisal of this complex issue, see A. Papafragou "Epistemic

possibilities and multiplicities, in order to avoid generalisations, superficiality, trivialisation and the flattening of complexity. Their narratives aim at revealing concealed (hi)stories, alternative ways of imagining the past and envisioning the future across the sliding doors of the present.

Modality and Truth Conditions", *Lingua,* 116 (2006), 1688-1702. Available online at the URL: http://papafragou.psych.udel.edu/papers/Lingua-epmodality.pdf.