

Realignment of Identity: A Study of Socio-Cultural Ecofeminism in Rita Chowdhury's Chinatown Days

R.K. Sangeetha and DR.P. Rathna

Abstract--- *A woman's identity changes due to various circumstantial issues such as marriage, childbirth, employment and so on. In addition to these cultural and social factors, environmental changes such as natural calamities and manmade disasters also effectuate identity changes in women. Some of the major impacts of environmental changes are migration, slave trade, cultural resistance, nationality changes, and statelessness. The novel Chinatown Days (2018) is a clear evidence for the identity crisis faced by women due to patriarchal and political upheavals. The author, Rita Chowdhury not only reveals the changes in women's identity but also reveals the identity changes in nature due to social and cultural domination. This paper aims to explore how environmental changes affect both women and nature equally and how the identity of women and nature have been realigned by three dimensional factors – social, cultural, and natural and man-made environmental factors with reference to Rita Chowdhury's Chinatown Days through the lens of socio-cultural ecofeminism.*

Keywords--- *Climate Change, Environmental Refugees, Exploitation, Realignment, Socio-cultural Ecofeminism.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental change is a change or disturbance of the environment most often caused by human influences and ecological processes. Environmental changes can be due to natural disasters, human intervention, or animal interfaces. The ecological consequences of climate changes include melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, vanishing coral reefs, extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires, and heat waves. The manifestations of environmental changes among human beings are disaster displacement, environmental refugees, slave trade, cultural resistance, statelessness, and identity changes. Women are victims of so many factors such as domestic violence, gender inequalities, and patriarchal domination. Likewise, they are victims of natural calamities such as tsunami, famine, drought, wildfire, and hurricane and manmade disasters like war, industrialization and so on. In many of these circumstances, indeed, women are more vulnerable than men to the impact of environmental changes. Environmental changes not only affect the women's identity but also the identity of nature. These changes are more often made severe through social and cultural factors and to be more specific, domination of man over woman and nature. Thus, it becomes imperative to study the changes in identity of women and nature and their realignment through socio-cultural Eco feminist lens.

"In the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir propositioned that the affinity between women and the 'natural world' was born of their common exploitation by men. This idea was then used by Françoise d' Eaubonne in 1974 to coin the term 'Ecofeminism'" (Fox-Smith 1). Ecofeminism, as a theory represents the link between feminism and ecology. It

R.K. Sangeetha, Ph.D Research Scholar, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crecent Institute of Science and Technology, Vandalur, Chennai.
E-mail: rkgeetha1990@gmail.com
DR.P. Rathna, Associate Professor, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crecent Institute of Science and Technology, Vandalur, Chennai.

connects the exploitation and oppression of women to the environment and illustrates the relationship between women and nature. As already stated, this term was coined by French writer Françoise d' Eaubonne in her book, 'Le Feminisme ou la Mort' (1974). Ecofeminism can be seen through different feminist perspectives like liberal, cultural, social and socialist feminism to strengthen the human-nature relationship. Social and cultural ecofeminism demonstrate the correlation between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women due to social structure and cultural practices and reveal the intimate relationship between women and nature. Priyanka Chanda attests, "An ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism, and neo-colonialism"(33).

Social ecofeminism wishes to liberate both women and nature from discrimination and destruction due to overpowering economical and political factors. According to Chen Ling, "social ecofeminism admits natural domination and gender domination, emphasizing the economic and political roots of domination and advocating political and economic changes to achieve the liberation of nature and women"(68). In *The Background and Theoretical Origin of Ecofeminism*, Chen Ling states that "Social ecology is an eco-anarchism. It emphasizes the social dimension and believes that the root of all disasters is a hierarchy. Hierarchy implies the existence of at least two groups, one of which has the power to dominate the other" (106). Thus the haves overpower the have-nots and disrupt the harmonious living.

Cultural ecofeminism emphasizes on the intimate relationship between women and nature through their biological roles such as menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation, and gender roles such as family nurturer and provider of food. Sherry Ortner's in her 1974 article "*Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture*", argues that, "cross-culturally and historically women, as opposed to men, have been seen as closer to nature because of their physiology, social roles, and psychology. Physiologically, women bring forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures, pain, and stigmas attached to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, while men's physiology leaves them freer to travel, hunt, conduct warfare, and engage in public affairs. Socially, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept married women close to the hearth and out of the workplace. Psychologically, women have been assigned emotional capacities with greater ties to the particular, personal, and present than men who are viewed as more rational and objective with a greater capacity for abstract thinking" (qtd. Merchant 190-191).

Thus women and nature are more vulnerable due to social and cultural practices. Chen Ling states that "According to cultural ecofeminists, the cause of the subservient positions of nature and women lies in the molding of natural temperament and identity of the female by social culture, which itself is on behalf of the male. To cultural ecofeminism, natural domination and gender domination are caused by patriarchal culture therefore, the relationship between women and nature must be recognized" (68). He further adds: "Ecofeminism also considers nature and women are the products of social culture construction" (105). In *The Manifestations and Symptoms of ecofeminism*, Chen Ling states that,

As a theory, ecofeminism emphasizes to explore the cause of domination from a social-cultural perspective. It believes that the root of natural domination and sexual domination is patriarchy and it advocates eliminating

patriarchy to achieve the dual liberation of nature and women. However, Ecofeminism, based on cultural transformation, starts from cultural changes, is not in favor of changing the production relation; therefore, it is impossible to really eliminate all forms of domination and achieve the real liberation of nature, gender, class, and race. (95)

Thus it becomes clear that it is really challenging to get relieved from the shackles of domination, especially when the oppressive chains are so intertwined. Apart from the social and cultural factors, women's identity changes due to environmental changes also. According to Greta Gaard, "Women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather it is a result of inequalities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty... In developing countries, women living in poverty bear the burden of climate change consequences, as these create more work to fetch water or to collect fuel and fodder- duties traditionally assigned to women. When households experience food shortages, which occur regularly and may become more frequent due to climate change, women are the first to go without food so that children and men may eat"(23).

Thus, the discernible influence of social, cultural and man-made environmental factors on the subjugation and exploitation of women and nature can be perceived. Consequently, this paper endeavors to explore the identity changes in women and nature by studying the impact of these three dimensional factors as socio-cultural ecofeminism and throw light on the realignment of identity through Rita Chowdhury's novel, *Chinatown Days*.

This novel, *Chinatown Days (CD)* (2018) by Rita Chowdhury is a moving saga of Chinese people, whose identity is changed as Indo-Chinese due to environmental changes. *Chinatown Days* is a translation by the author herself, of her novel *Makam*, originally written in Assamese in 2010. Chowdhury said that, "I learned that the story of the tea industry in Assam was inseparable from that of its migrant labourers. The Chinese community was deeply connected to this story, which had, however, never been properly documented. I wanted to bring alive that obscure part of history concerning the Chinese community in Assam and present it in the form of a novel" (*CD* 397). This novel depicts the reality of Chinese women's lives affected by drought: otherness, identity crisis, statelessness and subsistence. Rita Chowdhury has an exquisite technique of initiating the story to the readers- she employs an Assamese writer Arunabh Bora as a narrator to narrate the story, who is challenged by Lailin to write the story of her ancestors. The book comprises the history of the Chinese people who are expatriated to the tea garden of Assam as slaves. Lailin is daughter of a Chinese mother, Mei Lin, and an Assamese father, Pulok Baruah. Lailin is great granddaughter and fifth generation of Ho Han and Phulmati. Ho Han and Phulmati come from China as slaves to the tea garden in Assam in 1839. Arunabh Bora digs out the history of these Indo-Chinese people.

This novel is an epic chronicle of loss and separation, pain and anguish of hapless women who are trapped between the socio-cultural discrimination and their changing identities. In the year 1823, the British setup a foundation in Assam with the help of a chieftain on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. The British man, Robert Bruce sets up tea gardens in Assam to compete with the tea from China. After the death of Robert Bruce, his brother Alexander Bruce becomes the head of the tea garden. The subsequent story is set in China during the first Opium war in 1839. The aboriginal communities of China drink a beverage made of leaves called Phalap. Extreme drought

in China forces people to sell off even their children as slaves to slave traders, so that they could get some food in return. One such child named, Ho Han is sold to a meat dealer. However, destiny takes him from Lintin Island in southeastern China via Penang to Calcutta in India in the year 1841. The Chinese are forced to work as bonded laborers in Assam tea garden. With Ho Han, there are many slaves imported by the British from China. The British not only imports the labors from China, but also the phalap (tea) seeds. The identity of the Chinese monopoly 'phalap' is now changed as Assam tea.

The Chinese slowly, try to forget their sad lives as bonded laborers. The passing years see the gradual mingling of Chinese with the Assamese. They learn to speak and write Assamese language and teach their children too. The Chinese gradually evolve as Indo-Chinese. Intermarriages between Chinese and Assamese also take place in due course. One such couple is Mei Lin, a Chinese woman and Pulok Baruah, an Assamese man whose love is subtly portrayed throughout the novel. Mei Lin is the great-granddaughter of Ho Han and Phulmati, who come as slave from China to Assam. She belongs to the fourth generation of Ho Han's family. The Indo-Chinese are separated from their family by Sino-Indian war of 1962. Consequently the Indo-Chinese are sent back to China who are now considered as the enemy of Assamese. One such victim is Mei Lin; she is separated from her husband because she is considered as Chinese and not an Assamese though she married an Assamese. The Indo-Chinese now become as refugees and are sent back to China. But in their native place, the Chinese people do not accept the Indo-Chinese as Chinese. Though the ancestors of Indo-Chinese belong to China, the Chinese refuse to accept them as one among them. Mei Lin wants to escape from the bitter life in China for her daughter's better life. So she marries a Hong Kong man only for namesake and moves to Hong Kong. Though she marries a Hong Kong person, she is not able to forget her husband Pulok. At the end, Mei Lin meets Pulok in the book release function of Arunabh Bora. Chowdhury not only weaves the miserable life of Mei Lin but also the lives of other women characters like Dukhi, Phulmati who come as slave from China to Assam due to environmental changes and Yunlin, Yiu Yi, Mei Hang whose lives are affected due to Sino-Indian war.

Thus the identities of the Chinese or Indo-Chinese women keep changing due to socio-cultural changes and environmental changes. Though natural calamities affect both men and women, the impacts of climate change demonstrate women and children are victimized more than men. The novel, *Chinatown Days (CD)*, begins with a climate change, famine. The famine-stricken village, where Ho Han lives stands as an epitome of poverty. Famine and poverty force the parents to sell their children to slave traders. The first victims of selling are Ho Han's sisters. The identities of the girls begin to change from daughters into slaves for some silver coins and a jute bag full of rice. Their parents sell those girls without any emotional turmoil. Poverty deprives them of their humaneness and parental love and affection.

Ho Han's father looked at his wife. With weak and unsteady strides, he went inside the house. After a while, she returned with both her skeletal daughters, aged ten and eleven, and dressed in their best clothes. But they looked like scarecrows. Without any sign of emotion, the mother pushed her two daughters towards the buyer. Tottering weakly, they came and stood in the middle of the courtyard with their heads bend, indifferent to their surroundings. (*CD* 25)

The parents' expectation is that they will get some food so that the rest of the family can eat. The mother thinks

that the girls will get some food in their master's house and some discarded silk dresses to wear. At the beginning of the novel, Chowdhury shows the cruelty of poverty and sustainability of vulnerable women through selling their daughters. Hunger makes the family members forget about the girls: "The steaming aroma from the rice wiped off the memory of the two girls who'd just been sold" (CD 27).

Famine plays a cruel part in people's lives and makes them steal other's possessions. The village people steal the hidden rice and silver coins of Ho Han's parents which they get in return for selling their girls. Starvation makes them do so. The natural disaster forces them to be brutal: "The people with whom they'd lived for years had suddenly turned alien" (CD 27). Hunger drives Ho Han's father to sell the rest of the children to the slave traders. He carries the rest of the children like meat to the slave market. While he is stepping towards the market he listens to the voices of some migrating people with their bundled-up possessions tied on poles. These people are also from the famine-struck village moving in search of a better life. Ho Han's father goes to the extent of killing a dog to provide food for his family: "The dog would now provide the two of them enough food for at least four meals, now that the children would not return" (CD 29). Thus Environmental and social changes deprive people of their original human nature and force them to resort to brutal things for their survival.

II. SOCIO-CULTURAL ECOFEMINISM

Prof. Corneliue M. Lambi affirms that "The socio-cultural impacts of climate change can largely be discerned through the window of the prevailing economic perspective. The search for better socio-economic and socio-cultural enhancement remains a continuum of human activities. So it is a large understanding without a start or an end" (2). The novel, *Chinatown Days* reveals that the Indo-Chinese women are the preservers of their culture and tradition. Though their identity has seen changes, they never forget their culture and tradition. The Chinese are taken so far away from home to work in the tea gardens in Assam. Despite this, they get married among themselves and carry out their Chinese tradition harmoniously. The women in this novel teach their children both Assamese and Chinese languages. Manashi Changmai asserts that "The book *Makam* also includes detailed and minute description of social and cultural practices of Chinese-Assamese people, the tea-tribes and other people of Assam. The styles, festivals, customs of these people are described in the novel in a very deliberate way." (38).

Changes in the environment can also lead to changes in society and culture. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood articulates that "Social ecology stresses environmental problems as social problems, arising from the domination of human by human, but has little sensitivity to the domination of non-human nature" (18). *Chinatown Days* is evidence to the domination of nature by patriarchal society. The identity of China's monopoly 'Phalap' (tea) is changed as Assam tea. The identity change is effectuated not only for Chinese women by British man Alexander Bruce and also for Chinese tea seed: "China's monopoly slowly came to an end" (CD 47). Thus identity of women and nature has seen changes due to social and cultural domination.

The seeds for that change had first been sown by Robert Bruce who had discovered a treasure trove of phalap trees and had dreamt of becoming a great tea trader, terminating China's monopoly in the tea trade. Bearing the dreams of his brother, Charles Alexander Bruce, now Superintendent of Tea Culture for the Assam Company-established by the East India Company especially for tea trade-was leading those riders... (CD 47)

The identity change in nature in this novel can be seen through the urbanization in Assam. The urbanization has been closely linked to modernization, industrialization and sociological process of rationalization. The deforestation is the symbolic representation of identity changes and socio-cultural domination. "Now there were rows of coolie quarters, staff quarters and spacious thatched bungalows for managers, assistant managers, and superintendents. Beautiful Nahar trees were planted by the roads" (CD 73).

The production of tea in Assam not only changes the socio-economic and political order of Assam but also proves to be an evidence of encroachment and destruction of the forest. Nature is socially exploited and culturally dominated, resulting in changing the identity of the forest. "Swathes of forest land were cleared to expand the Naoholia tea garden... A huge workforce was needed to clear the forest for digging, planting, weeding and plucking" (CD 49). Man's greed for money and sophistication proves to be a death-knell for nature. "Large tracts of dense forest had been cleared and tea gardens had been set up" (CD 64). Behind all these destruction, encroachment, exploitation are socio-cultural factors. The company recruits Chinese coolies, tea makers and skilled labours to work in the tea garden. This is how Ho Han and other slaves come to Assam to work in the tea garden. The bonded laborers, especially the women workers are not treated fairly, like local workers. They are treated like slaves and are employed for very low wages. Women are forced to work even when they are sick. The Sardar of the tea garden insists Phulmati to work even she is sick is a case in point: "Phulmati, what happened? You are sitting as though you have grown roots into the soil'. 'I can't go out to work. I have a fever,' she said, sounding exhausted. Sardar forces her, 'Won't go to work? You have to. Come on. Get up. It's always "can't go to work" with you. Always excuses! Get up if you don't want a slap" (CD 71). The ordeals of women make them resemble the 'grown roots into the soil'. Women become stronger, more determined and more resilient, as they suffer more and more, like the deep grown roots into the soil.

The history of exploitation of nature and women can be trailed back to the inception of capitalism. Colonization has been another factor for exploitation. Man's greed for the accumulation of wealth, power and resources results in the ill-treatment of nature. The novel *Chinatown Days* shows the conditions of Chinese people in Assam. In the beginning, women envisage the labor agent as saviours. They feel, "...as if some angel had arrived to save them from poverty and hunger" (CD73). The agent exploits the people by fake promises about the place of Assam. They realize the truth only after reaching the place. Nature and women are equally exploited during the boat journey towards Assam. Women do not have any privacy. They do not get proper food and shelter. Most of them die during the boat journey. The dead bodies and the dying people are thrown into the waters during the journey. The rich and powerful exploit both women and nature. Both women and nature are socially exploited and culturally dominated. The exploitation of women and nature and also the environmental consciousness of the author can be seen through the character of Dukhi.

They believed the man and followed him onto a boat. After the boat ride, they had been tricked. Once the ship was stuffed with people, a journey of indescribable hardship had begun. Even now, whenever Dukhi remembered those days, she would wilt in shame. On the ship, with no privacy, Dukhi and the rest were compelled to answer the call of nature in front of everyone. Having very little to eat, they became emaciated. They withered under the sun and got drenched in the torrential rains. One after the other they fell sick: fever, cholera and the pox. Without any

treatment, Dukhi's husband and her three children passed away like many others. Along with the dead bodies, the dying were also thrown into the waters. (CD 73)

Dukhi's character is the perfect example of exploitation and identity changes of women. Dukhi loses her husband and her three sons during the journey. Her identity changes. The exploitative relationships are conqueror to conquered, man to woman and man to nature. "Men and women all placed in the same rooms filled with urine and faeces that flowed through the holes. Half of the captives died. But Dhukhi survived. She had survived to die a slow death" (CD73).

The domination and exploitation of women by patriarchal society make women as weak and vulnerable. Women are humiliated by manager in front of everyone. The manager ordered chowkidar to lift the women clothes. "With trembling steps he walked towards the women... chowkidar looked at the women for some time and made them bend forward and lifted their clothes up to their waist. In front of the uncountable eyes, the manager started flogging the bare buttocks of the three young women" (CD 90-91). The women labors' plight is compared to tea trees. Ho Han tries to console, Phulmati when she worries about her lost parent, "Think about these tea bushes. Don't think they're sad? A tree which was as tall as four men put together is cut to the size of half a man. But the tea tree did not die of that sorrow. Instead, it branched out from its sides. The tree did not die. It lived. We too have to live" (CD 92). Thus women draw their inspiration, strength and endurance from nature. The novel *Chinatown Days* exposes the will power of both women and nature in a hard-hitting situation. The tea tree is a perfect symbolic representation of identity changes. The tea tree is exploited in the name of business and its natural identity is changed for the convenience of human. Still it realigns its identity and survives. Similarly the exploited women also, resurrect from all their subjugating predicament and becomes empowered to tackle the life's challenges.

The novel moves to the Indo-Chinese habitat of Makum in Assam in the year 1962. The Chinatown of Makum is a place throbbing with life and is called Cheenapatti. The Chinese have married not only their community people but also the Assamese. These inter-ethnic marriages have given birth to children who are comfortable with the new Indo-Chinese identity given by the society. Those children can speak, read and write both languages 'Chinese and Assamese'. The Indo-Chinese' identity is disturbed again with the beginning of Sino-Indian war in 1962. The Indians begin to see the Chinese as their enemies. Though the Chinese were born in India, they have been treated as Chinese spies, even though they never have seen China. The new generation of Chinese people, who came as slaves and bonded labors believe themselves as Assamese. But these Indo-Chinese people especially women are sent back to China in a wretched condition. They become stateless. The Indo-Chinese are treated like culprits. It can be seen when Pulok's friends Hong and Ming burst out with anger when the military officer ask them to leave, 'We won't run away. Why should we? We haven't done anything wrong. Are we thieves? Are we dacoits? No, we won't run away. Let them take us away.' 'Don't be angry!' the father consoled. 'We are Chinese. That is the reality. Even if we live here for a thousand years, this will be our identity. They will not consider us one of them' (CD 231).

The Indian government arrests all the Chinese and Tibetan living in Assam, Darjeeling, and nearby areas to expel them to China. The government arrests them not only for national security but also for an agreement according to which the Chinese government could return the Indian PoW (Prisoners of War) to India in exchange of the

Chinese people. The discriminating arrest breaks up the inter-ethnic families. In a family, if the man is an Assamese and the woman is a Chinese the woman is arrested. Children are separated from their parents who are half-Chinese and half-Assamese, and they are taken in a train to somewhere far away by Indian military commanders.

Mei Lin stands as a perfect epitome for the socio-cultural domination in this novel. Pulok's father doesn't want a Chinese daughter-in-law. Every now and then Mei Lin is taunted by her father-in-law. She is victimized in the name of culture:

...it would be difficult to put up with her father-in-law's sarcasm. At least once a day he would find an excuse to vilify the Chinese and taunt her indirectly. Most of the comments against the Chinese were made by him when the neighbors gathered to listen to the news on the radio. Mei Lin felt that he had still not accepted her as his daughter-in-law. (CD 174)

Mei Lin separates from her husband when the Indian government sends back the Chinese to China. Her father-in-law secretly informs the police to arrest his Chinese daughter-in-law. In this novel, Mei Lin's identity changes due to socio-cultural factors like political discrimination and patriarchal domination. When the officer enquires Mei Lin 'Are you Mei Lin Ho?' 'Yes. But now I'm Mei Lin Baruah' (CD 244). It proves that she is one among the other Chinese affected by socio-cultural and environmental changes. The harsh treatments of police officers affect children, newborn babies and their mothers, and pregnant ladies. The police officers do not allow women to take their belongings, even accessories, for newborn babies. The police officer says, "Leave the bag. No permission to take anything along, except your papers. Don't take anything with you,'... 'There are clothes for my baby in the bag,' Yunlin said. 'It doesn't matter what it contains. You can't take it. That's all.'"(CD 225). The Indo-Chinese are taken far away from Assam as refugees through train. The train is a symbolic representation of socio-cultural discrimination over Indo-Chinese. The oppressive authorities and the hopeless predicament of the refugees are depicted thus:

All shutters had been pulled down. All doors were closed. There was no way to find out how far they had traveled and where they were. In the early hours of the morning, a mysterious train sped on. On that train was a load of prisoners of Chinese origin who had no idea where they were going. (CD 263).

Thus Rita Chowdhury has consciously portrayed the intensity of women's suffering by political and patriarchal or socio-cultural domination. Chen Ling says that "Ecofeminism observes the cause of domination from a social-cultural perspective and believes that patriarchy is the common root that causes natural domination and sexual domination and natural liberation and female liberation can be achieved by eliminating patriarchy. This is a theoretical issue proposed by Ecofeminism" (95). The socio-cultural domination can be seen in the treatment of Indo-Chinese in refugees train. In imprisonment camps, the young children die of heatstroke. "Yulin was unable to breastfeed her baby. Her milk had dried up. The baby was crying in hunger. The pregnant Wai Kwan lay listless. The children were silent, knowing that there was no use complaining" (CD 270). Women and children bear the brunt of oppressive socio-cultural norms. They become the easy victims who are helpless and clueless. As observed by Greta Gaard, "Women produce the majority of the world's food, yet the majority of the world's hungry are women and children, not men" (20). However, women, naturally gets empowerment to tackle even the most harrowing

situation. Though they become physically weak, their psychological strength provides them the requisite energy to survive. Mei Lin proves her resilience when she fetches water from train toilet to quench a little boy's thirsty.

Mei Lin stood for a few moments and then turned back. There was still some water in the toilet.

'Mei Lin, are you going to give him the water from the toilet?'

'The child is so thirsty. What else can I do?'

Mei Lin returned with the water...people made a beeline for the toilet. (CD 272)

The refugees have to undergo traumatic experience during the train journey. They have to eat half cooked food. The officers insist some refugees or Indo-Chinese make Khichidi with a time limit of one hour. After the time limit, they ask them to distribute the half cooked food to all the refugees. One of the Chinese said "'The Khichdi is half-cooked, sir.' 'Shut up, you,' the officer thundered. 'If it isn't cooked, so be it. You will have to eat it as it is. If you don't want to, throw it away. Finish serving within fifteen minutes' (CD 274). The train starts to move. Most of them are empty handed. Mei Lin, like Mother Nature who offers her bounty despite the human exploitation, shares her meager food with the starving children. She calls the children, 'Come on children, come and eat khichdi' (CD 275). The identity crisis faced by the Indo-Chinese in the refugees' camp, is revealed when they try to write a letter to their family who are in Assam. They have a dilemma to which address they are supposed to post the letter. They have no address, district, and post offices. "We will need the district, post office, and so on.' 'I don't know all that.' One of the Chinese exhausts, 'My address is also like that,' said another. 'Write Jonaki Wong. Dafalagar garden'. 'With these addresses, the letters won't reach' (CD 296). The refugees' train and camp stand as evidence for the socio-cultural domination and the Indo-Chinese identity crisis.

The Chinese government makes it clear that they do not take the refugees back out of some compassion. They are allotted to work on the farm in China by the Chinese government. The indigenous Chinese people are reluctant to accept the Indo-Chinese as one among them. Though the ancestors of Indo-Chinese belong to China, the Chinese consider the returnees as encroachers. Even the Indo-Chinese people do not consider themselves as Chinese. Yiu Yi's mother mourns, "...the ones who had left behind their kin and their motherland for their husband and children, the ones who were forced to desert their Indian identity and citizenship, perhaps forever" (CD 342). The Indo-Chinese consider themselves as Assamese; the women refuse to wear Chinese dress. "The Hindu women still applied vermillion. They didn't eat beef and some of them didn't even eat pork" (CD 339). The socio-cultural domination is seen through the response of Chinese people over the Indo-Chinese refugees:

They kept harassing the returnees. Some villagers would enter the farm and steal the vegetables and other crops. They even took away their clothes hung outside for drying. They abused and attacked those who tried to protest. They passed humiliating comments on the road and tried to find excuses to fight. (CD 340)

Mei Fung, a pregnant woman is one of the victims of socio-cultural suppression. She is punished for eating peanuts which are given for sowing by a Chinese officer. For her crime, she is punished with three days of starvation. The Chinese officer said, 'For your first crime as a refugee, we will not punish you. But three days of food coupons will be deducted. You also have to stand here and face denouncement and apologize. Come over here' (CD 357).

The Indo-Chinese women desperately long for freedom from the shackles of their oppressive predicament. Mei Hang laments, “Where was the road to freedom? Where was the way to bloom?”... They are like ‘trapped insects in the web’ (CD 370). Though they are trapped by the web of discriminating socio-cultural norms, they never lose hope. Mei Lin doesn't want her daughter to grow up in this dark place. Her friend Mei Hang said, ‘We can't let our children grow up here. Without education, they will have to work as laborers wherever they go. Find a way out, Hon. There is definitely a way out’ (CD 377). Women are the ones who want to change their children's identity from being laborers. Mei Lin changes her identity for her daughter's good life. She goes and marries a Hong Kong person. She is now Mei Lin Wong. Her identity again changes for her daughter's better life. Though she marries a Hong Kong person for a better life, she finds it difficult to forget Pulok. Like the tea trees, which sustains the exploitation of man, these women also despite their victimization, manages to survive by realigning their identity.

III. CONCLUSION

As rightly asserts by Bookchin, “The domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (1). Environmental changes in society have enormous implications. The novel *Chinatown Days* (CD) deals with these changes which are caused by a natural calamity as well as human enforced environmental destruction. Famine is the beginning of the identity change in the lives of Chinese people. This novel deals with the identity change of Chinese women into Indo-Chinese. Eventually, the women in this novel consider themselves as Assamese, not Chinese. Not just the women alone, nature also becomes the victim of human exploitation. Its identity is also altered. However, it rejuvenates itself and nourishes life to everyone. Similarly, the women also draw their strength from nature and this natural interconnection with the environment endows them with the requisite determination and resilience to realign their identity.

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