

## On Insider-Outsider in North East India

Amanda Bashisha Basaiaiwmoit<sup>†</sup>

### Abstract

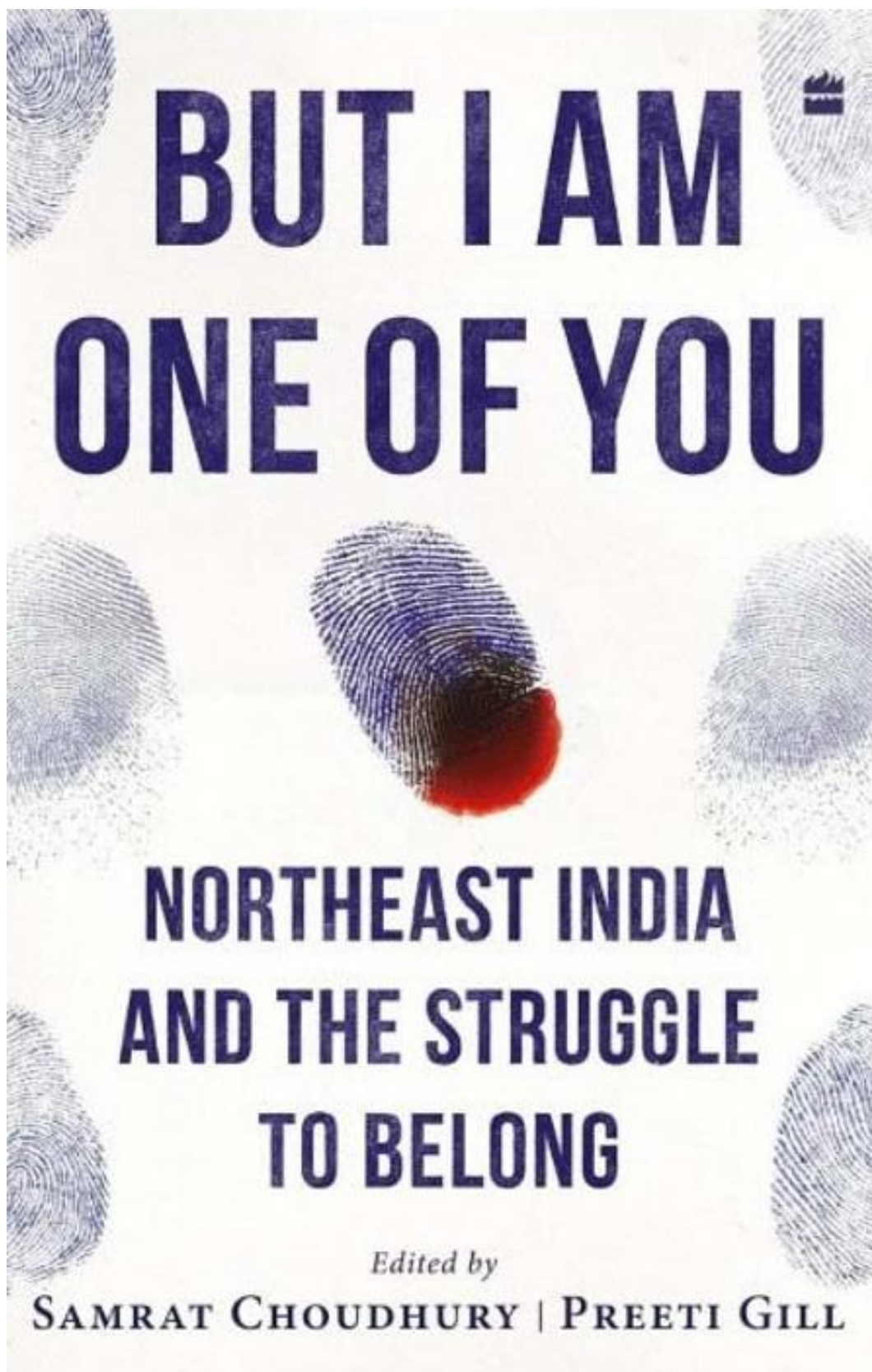
In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the critical questions of identity in North East India, revealing the intricate inter-group relationships essential for understanding human interactions. A significant aspect of this discourse is the phenomenon of 'othering', which fosters binaries such as 'us and them' and underscores the marginalisation that arises from this process. The complexities of these intergroup dynamics pose vital questions regarding belonging. In the context of North East India, this is manifested in two primary ways. Individuals from this region face marginalisation and are subsequently othered by their fellow citizens in mainland India, who ascribe to them a distinct 'Northeast identity'. Conversely, residents from various states within the region often perceive settlers, particularly those from mainland India, as outsiders or non-natives, thereby reinforcing their own status as insiders.

This book review commentary will analyse how the anthology, ***But I Am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong***, edited by Samrat Choudhury and Preeti Gill, India: Harper Collins, 2024; pp. (ix +275), ISBN 978-93-6213-857-6, Rs.599 (softcover). The book addresses the complex interplay of the politics of belonging and identity through the lens of belongingness and identity theory. This review commentary aims to initiate a critical inquiry into identity politics and belonging—an emerging area of interest and investigation across multiple disciplines, particularly within the contemporary Indian context.

**Keywords:** North East India; Identity; Othering; Insider; Outsider; Belonging

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## North East India: Politics of Identity and Belonging

The problem of the twenty-first century is the issue of "othering". In a world filled with complex and daunting challenges, nearly every global, national, and regional conflict is tied to one or more aspects of group-based differences. India, particularly the North East region, is no exception. The partition of India, followed by the formations of eight states of North East India in the post-independence era, coupled with urbanisation and increased regional mobility, led to the growth of migrant settlers from various cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities across different parts of North East India (Basaiawmoit & Mangang, 2022). In each of the states of North East India, this has influenced the inter-group relations that, in turn, have led to the assumption of an 'us' versus 'them' identity, highlighting asymmetrical power dynamics. The *Social Identity Theory*, which posits that individuals define themselves as part of a social group (Abrams & Hoggs, 1988; Turner et al., 1987), has led to the growth of two groups in North East India: the in-group or insiders who are a majority who dominate over the out-group or outsiders who are a minority. The complexities of these intergroup dynamics, in turn, have raised questions about belonging. Further, the concept of belonging, as a theoretical framework, initially articulated by Baumeister and Leary in 1995, posited that the need to belong is fundamentally rooted in evolutionary theory. As social beings, humans have historically depended on close social connections for survival; Maslow (1943), in his *Theory of Human Motivation*, highlighted that belonging extends beyond mere acquaintance; it encompasses an emotional need to affiliate with and be accepted by a group. Youkhana (2015) describes belongingness as a relatively new and increasingly significant term, especially in today's multicultural society, where issues of inclusion and exclusion are prevalent. Seemingly, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) emphasises that identity shapes ones' understanding of belonging, with identity politics playing a crucial

role. Nira Yuval-Davis (2004, 2006) further differentiates the nuances of belonging by looking at the interplay between different social groups and the politics that emerge from these interactions. She asserts that belonging transcends mere membership and rights; it is a deep emotional need, although intertwined with concepts such as identity narratives and social labelling. Consequently, the politics of belonging reveal that power dynamics influence both individual and collective experiences of belonging. This interplay of power is particularly evident for stigmatised groups, as evidenced by Walton and Cohen's (2007) research, which highlighted the social challenges they face concerning belonging.

In recent years, scholars who have focused on the critical questions of identity and belonging in the North East of India have uncovered the workings of complex inter-group relationships. In India's North East, a prominent aspect of this discourse due to this phenomenon of "othering" reveals the manifestation of marginalisation experience in two ways. On one hand, the region's people, who are often seen as peripheral, are "othered" by citizens of mainland India, who impose on them a "Northeast identity" (Haokip 2012, p. 85) and look at them differently as if they do not belong to India (Haokip, 2020). Additionally, within the states of North East India, the othering politics can be reversed, wherein non-native settlers, particularly Nepalis, Marwaris, and Punjabis, also experience othering in the hands of native insiders. In this aspect, the anthology *But I Am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong*, edited by Samrat Choudhury and Preeti Gill, through its very title, conveys that it focuses on the North Easterners' struggle for belonging, amplified by their othered experience.

## Review

Before commencing this book review commentary, it is vital to note that the earlier work, *Insider Outsider: Belonging and Unbelonging in North East India*, also edited by Preeti Gill and Samrat Choudhury, had certain limitations as it showcased essays by Assamese

and Bengali authors, which led the discourse to be primarily focused on Assam and Shillong not revealing the broader insider-outsider dynamics across the diverse North Eastern Region. The voices of other minority outsider groups were also notably missing.

The present book *But I Am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong*, in its 18 detailed essays, has addressed the gaps mentioned above by uniting a range of voices drawn from the eight north-eastern states, including voices of the Indigenous tribal as well as the migrants or settlers living in the region. Through this representation, the book presents a distinctive viewpoint, capturing the unique micro-histories of the various groups and the multitude of narratives within each state of North East India. Notably, the 18 essays are more than just scholarly articles as they encapsulate lived experiences and offer personal reflections, engaging readers and sparking significant discussions around the insider-outsider issue. As these essays explore historical and ongoing political and social evolutions in the North East of India, they provide insight into how tribal communities and settlers navigate life in this varied terrain.

While some contributors, such as Ramona Sangma and Sangeeta Pisharoty, discuss the experiences of being othered as North-Easterners in mainstream India, others, like Vatsala Tibrewalla, highlight the phenomenon of reverse othering faced by non-tribals in the region. Contributors Abhishek Saha and Rashmi Narzary emphasise that in Assam, the primary demarcations between insiders and outsiders have traditionally been language, followed by religion. At the heart of these identity issues, language as another factor is also addressed by Patricia Mukhim, who discusses how undivided Assam attempted to impose the Assamese language on Meghalaya's tribal communities, resulting in political unrest and, ultimately, the formation of the state. In Tripura, Subir Bhaumik points out that the demographic disparity between the Indigenous tribal population and Bengali refugees, along with economic inequality, has led to conflicts between these groups, culminating in current demands for a

separate tribal state, as the tribal minority feels marginalised by the Bengali majority. In her essay, *Many Complexities of a 'Simple' Tribal Identity*, Ranju Dodum from Arunachal Pradesh illustrates how tribal identity is fluid and often relative to one's location. Outside of India, one is perceived as an Indian; outside the North East, one identifies as a North-Easterner; in Guwahati, a connecting hub, one claims allegiance to their respective state; as one travels into their home state, they identify with a specific district or tribe, which ultimately narrows down to the clan and family. These contributors have demonstrated that the North East of India is an exceptionally diverse area where identity is crucial to the region's political landscape.

Identity politics is what makes this region volatile. It is no wonder that the first four pieces of this book focus on Manipur. Manipur has three ethnic communities, the Meiteis, Nagas, and Kuki, and a Muslim community called "Pangals" and the non-tribal from mainland India who are termed as Mayang from mainland India (Kipgen, 2018, as cited in Pautunthang, 2024, p.73). The Meiteis, who make up a majority "constitute 53 per cent of the state's population, are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs), with some segments recognised as Scheduled Castes (SCs) in specific regions" (Kipgen, 2018 as cited in Pauthunthang, 2024. p.75). On the other hand, the Nagas, who constitute "24 per cent of the state's population," and the Kukis, "who constitute 16 per cent of the state's population", represent the minority, are primarily Christian and recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs). (Nayak, 2012; Sharma, 2016 as cited in Pautunthang, 2024. p.75). The Manipur conflict 2023 between the Meiteis, residing mainly in the plains, and the Kuki-Zo, predominantly occupying the hills, drew the nation's attention when it transformed the state into a war zone. The conflict began with the Kuki protests on the High Court's mandate to the Manipur state government to provide recommendations regarding the Meiteis' request for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. This status is vital, as it would grant the Meiteis ownership of land currently held by the Nagas and Kukis, who fear it would lead to Meitei

dominance over political and economic resources. Notably, in Manipur, the geographical divide between the hills and the plains, the religious divisions, the linguistic differences, the imbalance in representation in the state legislature, the imbalance in development despite the budget allocations, the illegal immigration issues being close to the border have fuelled the distrust among these two groups. All these issues, coupled with the lack of political will, have led to the growth of fear of disturbing the states' demographic balance. In the present conflict between the Meiteis and Kukis, the Kuki-Zo tribes, who claim Indigenous status, now face suspicion of being recent migrants from Myanmar. This, in turn, has sparked a debate on the issue of insider and outsider- who belongs and who does not. Considering this present conflict in Manipur, the four essays are enlightening as they help readers understand the questions of identity and the politics of identity at work.

Indira Laishrams' essay discusses the author's negotiation of her Meitei Manipuri identity having grown up in Silchar, Assam. As she describes the subtle differences between Meiteis who lived in Manipur and those who lived outside the state, she states that the Meiteis of Manipur consider her an outsider. This outsider tag is imposed on her not just by the Meiteis of Manipur but by the people of the places she lived in and considered her home, be it Assam, Delhi, or Australia. On the other hand, Makepeace Sitlhou, in her write-up, *Always the Square Peg*, talks of the identity of a Kuki in Manipur, wherein the Meitei who live in the valley like the people of mainland India do not consider them as Indians. Teresa Rehman's narrative reportage on the Meitei Pangals or the Meitei Muslims, who are viewed as 'Others' by the Hindu-Meiteis even though they speak the same language, eat the same food, and wear the same clothes as the other Meiteis. On the other hand, Veio Pou, a Naga from the hills of Manipur, voices out against the otherisation experiences, noting that the cosmopolitan space of Delhi has created an atmosphere of unbelonging, one which he states he never felt even though presently the hills to which he belongs is

regarded as the conflict zone of Manipur. Though these four essays collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex workings of the politics of identity in Manipur, the account of the Mayangs or settlers from the mainland, who are oft classified as the outsider group in many states of the North East India, needs to be included. Nonetheless, these essays have revealed how identity contributes to the antagonism between the Meiteis and Kukis. In doing so, it has shown how this present conflict is a mirror image reflection of the insider and outsider group conflicts prevalent in other states of North East and mainland India.

The essay of Pratap Chettri, a fourth-generation Gorkhali and Indian Nepali from Mizoram, presents the voices of the minority communities of the region who have lived for generations in the region. In his essay, he highlights the constant need for his group to distinguish themselves from the citizens of Nepal. However, the historical presence of Gorkhas in North East India, particularly in the state of Mizoram, dates back to almost two centuries. Chettri points out that excluding Sikkim, Indian Gorkhas are still perceived as outsiders and sometimes not considered Indian. Margaret Zama's account depicts the onset of the Mizo National Front insurgency and the resulting damage and suffering due to the conflict between the Central Government and the underground. She highlights her fathers' proactive role in negotiations and emphasises resilience and reconciliation in the face of suffering, advocating for resistance against divisive ambitions that lead to destruction.

In her memoir *That Was My Hometown Too*, Easterine Kire shares her personal experience with a Punjabi classmate who grew up in Nagaland. She highlights the past harmonious coexistence of Naga and Non-Naga communities, characterised by friendship and mutual respect. However, she observes that the Naga National Movement led to the emergence of conflicting Naga and non-Naga identities, fuelling tensions and violence and sowing the seeds of belonging and un-belonging. Nona Arhe's poignant voice speaks out for the harassed and marginalised migrant labourers

residing in Nagaland. She highlights the plight of these labourers, who have dedicated their entire lives to performing menial jobs contributing to the state's growth and economy but are still not recognised as insiders because they are not Nagas. The COVID-19 lockdown, as pointed out by Bhanot, Singh, Verma, and Sharad (2021), has exposed this categorisation and stigmatisation of migrant labourers, revealing that their lack of belonging is a widespread issue in other regions of India as well. As Arhe advocates for the necessity of transforming these narratives of exclusion and otherness, particularly in North East India and especially in Nagaland, she emphasises that this need should also apply to urban centres across India.

An intriguing essay in this collection appears as a dialogue between Karma Pajlor, a Bhutia from Sikkim, and Naresh Agarwal, a fourth or fifth-generation Marwari who also resides in Sikkim. This conversational piece explores the complicated issue of Sikkimese citizenship that was granted in 1961 by the Chogyal (Sir Tashi Namgyal, who reigned from 1914 to 1963). Consequently, the Nepalis, Lephchas, and Bhutia communities who accepted this citizenship and had their names recorded in the Sikkim Subjects Register considered themselves Indigenous communities; under the terms of their merger with India, they were exempted from income tax. However, in 2008, when the Income Tax Act of 1961 was applied to Sikkim, those early settlers who did not acquire Sikkimese citizenship were required to submit tax returns and pay income tax like any other Indian citizen. "The Association of Old Settlers of Sikkim (AOSS), comprising of 'Indian origin' old settlers of Sikkim" filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court of India in 2008 claiming for tax exemption. (Sinha. 2023. p.4) The AOSS in their legal efforts to include the Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabis, and Muslims who had settled in Sikkim before it became part of India in this list of "old settlers" (Thatal, 2020, p. 310) were supported by the Indigenous communities. The basis for this conversational essay arises from this Supreme Court ruling of January 2023, which granted income tax exemption to all in the list of "old settlers" in Sikkim. This judgement was

welcomed by most people in Sikkim, including the state government, but furore over the judgement came two weeks later, over the description of Sikkimese Nepalis as "foreigners" and "migrants". The Indigenous settlers who had supported the AOSS felt betrayed upon discovering that this exemption was achieved by arguing that since the Indigenous communities, particularly the Nepalis, were foreign nationals and enjoyed the privilege of tax exemption, these old settlers, as actual Indians, should benefit from it. Though the Supreme Court, in the review petition judgement, removed this remark that had described the "Sikkimese Nepalis as persons of foreign origin", the events created "a fear" in the "communities who identified themselves as native and local" (Sinha, 2023, p. 8). It created a division within Sikkim, where Indigenous old settlers who opted for Sikkimese citizenship regarded themselves as insiders, while the old settlers whose names were not included in the Sikkim Subjects Register were viewed as outsiders. This tension led to the formation of binary groups, with the Indigenous Sikkimese citizens viewing the old settlers with suspicion and asserting that they should not enjoy the same privileges available to the Indigenous Sikkimese.

### Conclusion

The essays in the book delve into the complex identity frameworks found across the various states of North East India. Each contribution offers a unique and paralleled viewpoint, highlighting the distinct micro-histories of varied groups and the myriad narratives within each state. Barring Hamari Jamatia's essay on fashion and politics that draws upon understanding the earliest Indigenous women's movement, each first-hand narrative essay provides a personal and subjective understanding of the complex insider/outsider issue. This anthology, unlike the previous publication, has provided a platform for the voices of those other minority outsider groups that have often been ignored and overlooked. However, in doing so, these essays collectively do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the insider-outsider conflict, which can be attributed to several other factors

that include economic negligence, high unemployment, illegal immigration, social exclusion, and minority syndrome, to name a few. Further, though the essays focus on identity issues, no single essay has addressed the intra-tribal otherisation of the non-native tribal residing in other tribal states. The issue of the improper demarcation of the state borders in North East India post-independence, which is another reason for otherisation among native North-Easterners not residing in their native state and which has resulted in intra-tribal and inter-state ethnic conflicts, has also not been comprehensively addressed in this book.

Nonetheless, it is commendable that these narrative essays investigate the nuances of belonging and unbelonging by scrutinising how these sentiments manifest and are experienced, alongside their ramifications for individuals and communities, which in turn have sparked a discussion on the issue of who is an insider or outsider. In doing so, they pose vital questions about who possesses the authority and influence to decide who qualifies to belong and who does not. In examining what is lost or gained when individuals are classified as part of a social group, the essays manage to subtly reveal the mechanisms, strategies and processes that enforce such inclusion and exclusion of individuals in society. However, it may be pointed out that none of the essays discuss how the different political and social organisations and groups of each state have fuelled and fanned the politics of identity.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the anthology has surfaced at a pivotal moment in history to start a critical inquiry into identity politics while addressing the notion of belonging. With this context, one can conclude that the editors of the book—*But I Am One of You: Northeast India and the Struggle to Belong* brought out this publication as an extension of the previously published anthology *Insider Outsider: Belonging and Unbelonging in North East India*. In effectively addressing the intricate "insider-outsider" issue in North East India, the book encourages open dialogue among readers drawn from diverse communities. In turn, such cross-cultural exchanges will contribute to

greater mutual understanding, which is the first step towards resolving the issue. Acknowledging the complex identity frameworks found across the various states of North East India as revealed in the publication, policymakers both at the centre and the state will realise that it is of utmost importance that any interventions to break down the insider-outsider dynamics must be tailored to meet the distinct needs of each state and community. For example, economic interventions that will help mitigate feelings of perceived marginalisation felt by the Indigenous people North East may include localised economic development initiatives such as offering targeted training to enhance job opportunities for the local populace. The government must also engage with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community leaders, which is vital to ensure that the proposed solutions are effectively implemented at the grassroots level. In conclusion, the 'insider-outsider' issue necessitates sustained efforts and a holistic approach to achieve meaningful and enduring change.

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I declare that the book review is based on a published work and does not involve any new research or data collection requiring ethical review. The analysis presented in the manuscript is based solely on the published text and adheres to standard academic practices of critical evaluation and fair commentary. Further, I declare that the manuscript, does not infringe any copyright and does not violate any privacy rights and permission to use excerpts from the published anthology for this publication has been obtained from the Editors ( *copy of permission email from Editors of the book is attached*). Further, this book review is intended



to provide an objective evaluation of the book for the general reading public, with no attempt to mislead or misrepresent.

In this book review commentary, I have attempted to look at the anthology and analyse how it addresses the complex workings of the politics of belonging and identity using the theory of belongingness and identity. This book commentary is significant because belonging is an emerging subject of interest and interrogation across multiple disciplines, especially in the context of contemporary society. It may be added that in the realm of Northeast writings in English, the otherisation of Northeast people in mainland India has been well documented. However, the reversed otherisation as experienced by the native non-tribal in Northeast India has not been documented much, in order to emerge as an alternative voice. Therefore, this book review commentary attempts to show how this un-

belonging is felt and experienced not only by the resident non-tribal but by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous tribal themselves, thereby tracing the complex politics of belonging. I declare that while the review addresses these relevant issues, however, all opinions expressed are based on the published text and are presented with due consideration. As such, a conflict of interest regarding statements presented in the manuscript does not exist. I declare that book reviews are not included/considered as a requirement for my ongoing research. As such, I did not have to seek the approval of the research committee. I agree that I will be responsible for correspondence with the editorial office in all stages of the publication process.

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I also declare that no funding has been received for the research and/or publication of the book review commentary.

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