

# Mapping the Psychological Trauma of Violence in Selected North-East Indian English Novels

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to document the trauma of violence and militancy in a socio-politically disturbed North-East India, especially Nagaland and Assam, and to trace how people cope with this aspect with all its impacts on their daily lives. With this purpose, the proposed paper aims to analyse Estherine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and Aruni Kashyap's debut novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013) as both have the backdrop of a fight for sovereignty and conflict with militancy. As a psychoanalytic study, this paper endeavours to examine fear and trauma endured by the common people in conflict-ridden Nagaland and Assam as reflected in the novels. In other words, how trauma is manifested in the novels will be unfolded with the employment of trauma theories of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth while highlighting the psychological effects of trauma of violence on people.

**Keywords:** Militancy; North-East India; Psychoanalysis; Trauma; Violence.

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The hills and valleys are steeped in an infinite silence  
There are interminable tremors now  
In the wide jhum fields  
Bloodstains fresh and dried lie scattered  
Everywhere on the ground. (Chakma 77)

The above lines from the poem "The Right Hour" by Niranjana Chakma describe the disturbed state of his homeland, i.e., Northeast India; a land rich and unique in terms of cultural heritage, tradition and customs, and ethnic and linguistic diversity. However, it is undeniable that the land is cursed with various insurgent activities and movements. North-East India

has witnessed a long history of militancy and decades of violence arising due to various socio-political issues. As the land is heterogeneous in nature, therefore, conflict in the name of ethnicity, language, and sovereignty shook the region for a long time. People of the region have faced the problems of violence, ethnic clashes, and many political upheavals which forced them to live in socially, politically, economically, and psychologically troubled conditions. Illegal migration has been a constant problem for Northeast India because of its geographical location. The land shares international borders with several countries causing ceaseless movements and migration across borders and thus bringing threats to the culture, language, and ethnic identities of the indigenous people of the land. This caused consternation among the people and they feared of losing their native land and identity, resulting in various ethnic and communal clashes and agitations by the locals. In such a context Prof. Kailash C. Baral comments, "If the past has a rootedness in harmony among communities and cultures, the present is a reality of profound disaffection. The violence that stalks this land is part of everyday life that adds to the fragility of the human condition. In spite of all this, life goes on" (6). The writers from this region have responded to this aspect in their literary works and recorded the socio-political scenarios and trauma of innocent people significantly.

In any epoch, which, basically, has to deal with militancy and violence, the concepts of fear, anxiety and trauma always make vehement entries in literary discourses. Today, with the advancements in literary fields, writers from Northeast India are recognized worldwide. These writers, no doubt, celebrate the unique character of the region in terms of its socio-cultural assimilation, diverse cultures, tradition, ethnicity, cuisine, dress, language and ethos of life. But at the same time, they have vehemently raised their voices against issues and problems that cause disturbance to the people and peace of the land. As the land has witnessed different movements, conflicts, and insurgencies, therefore, the writers from this region are concerned about the sufferings of common people and the psychological impact of such conflicts on them. These traumatic experiences endured by the general public are clearly reflected in contemporary writings produced from the region for which poetry and fiction are employed as useful genres to reflect socio-political and socio-psychological realities. In fact, many novels and short stories have been produced which have their origin in the real incidents that have been witnessed by the people of the land and the writers themselves. In other words, such works reflect the trauma of society of the region because of the prolonged presence of AFSPA (Armed Force Special Power Act) in the land. The conflict between AFSPA and militants resulted in threats of existence for common people

causing psychological disruptions, especially in Nagaland and Assam. On this ground, this paper seeks to examine and understand the trauma of violence endured by the people of these two states in conflict-ridden predicaments as reflected in Estherine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) and Aruni Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013). Both novelists have attempted to portray the disturbed political picture of their respective lands because of conflicts, violence and militancy while providing a better scope for grasping the real experience of the trauma of common people and thereby, carrying on a psychoanalytic investigation.

Trauma is an inseparable part of human life. According to the Dictionary Merriam-Webster, trauma is "a disordered psychic or behavioural state" which resulted from serious "mental or emotional stress or physical injury" (merriam-webster.com). The reason for traumatized experience and existence is generally associated with any horrific incident or stressful situation which impacts the psyche grievously causing the emotional reaction to it. However, "trauma has an inherently ethical, social, political and historical dimension" (Heidarzadeh 789). Social changes, personal issues, unresolved or repressed emotional matters, sexual abuse, forceful social repression, impact of political and cultural clashes may also lead one to experience a traumatized existence: The study of trauma or traumatic experience is guided by the psychological concepts foregrounded by Sigmund Freud. Written with Josef Breuer, Freud's initial theories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) focused on trauma and repression which later became the conceptual framework for literary trauma critics. In this work, Freud stressed that it is repetitive behaviours or processes of remembering that force the mind to experience psychological pain or confront the incident.

His *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is a work on war neurosis and the 'compulsion to repeat' the dreadful historical events. He highlights the concept of traumatic neurosis and suggests that human is governed by the death drive. Cathy Caruth, another leading figure of trauma theory, defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11) in her influential work on trauma titled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Caruth claims that trauma is trans-historical which is passed over generations through both verbal and written actions such as language, literature, traditions and so on. In terms of psychiatric literature, trauma, according to her, "is understood as wound of the mind rather than the wound of the body" (3) since it involves emotions and feelings. She holds the view that "the impact of trau-

ma is intense because it cannot be specified to have a particular location or source of origin" (Konwar and Dutta 4). As an interdisciplinary approach, trauma theory is intimately connected with war, history, sociology, psychology, and remarkably with literature. Psychoanalysis, trauma theory and literature have a close relationship because postmodern literary texts are significantly associated with the psyche of literary characters as representations of real people.

*Bitter Wormwood* has the backdrop of Naga's struggle for sovereignty in the 1950s and 60s. In the novel, Estherine Kire reinterprets the Modern Naga history and presents a simplified picture of the Naga insurgency. While putting down history, she deals with experiences, sufferings and loss of her people due to such incidents. In the Author's Introduction, she makes it clear that the novel "is not about the leaders and heroes of the Naga struggle" but "is about the ordinary people whose lives were completely overturned by the freedom struggle" (Kire 6). Kire herself accepts that this novel is written as an act of catharsis. In an interview she says, "I had to write a novel that followed the Naga freedom movement chronologically in order to make younger generations understand how the conflict started and why" (Mallick "In Conversation"). Similar to Kire, Kashyap's *The House with a Thousand Stories* is also based on true historical events which had taken place in Assam, i.e., Assam agitation and secret killings resulting from it. The novelist has fictionalized the insurgent activities resulting out of the unaddressed issue of the instreaming of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and the negligence of the Central Government towards the socio-economic development of the state.

In the novel, Kashyap has traced the conflicts between active militants (ULFA) and ex-militants (surrendered ULFA), and the militants and armed forces. He has attempted to present the hard reality of Assam agitation and the gruesome consequences of ULFA's strict adherence to the ideology of upholding 'asomiya jati' (Assamese community) and also the vision of a separate free Assam. Udayon Misra, while talking about the Assam agitation and Assamese national question in his book *North-East India: Quest for Identity* (1988) comments, "If today the Assamese are being accused of harbouring xenophobic feelings, it is because of the unenviable circumstances in which they have been placed. The mass upsurge centred round the foreign nationals issue must be seen as the outburst of a nationality which has had a long history of neglect, suppression and exploitation" (66). Therefore, while dealing with the intensity of the movement, Aruni Kashyap has captured the xenophobic existence of his people and the traumatic atmosphere lurking in the state.

The violence associated with the separatist movement became a melancholic part of people's lives as they witnessed bloodshed and killings almost every day in both novels. Aruni Kashyap's novel draws a contemporary portrait of Assam in the late 90s and early 20s through the protagonist, Pablo, a sixteen-year-old young boy living in Guwahati. During this period Assam was torn apart by insurgency and counter-insurgent activities of the armed forces which resulted in secret killings deeply affecting the common people's lives as they had to suffer the consequences that caused psychic turmoil and trauma. With the backdrop of secret killings in Assam in the novel, Kashyap has made Pablo the only witness of the cruel realities of violence and insurgency in his two visits to his ancestral village, Hatimura – for a funeral and wedding. Before sending Pablo to Moina's wedding with Mridul, his mother "...had scanned the papers – like a kite eyeing lonely preys on the ground – for shutdowns and protests" (Kashyap 30) and when there was no call for *bandh* or shutdown it became abnormal for her. Pablo says, "...as if it was abnormal *not* to have a shutdown, some unrest, some killing or an unhappy organization calling for trouble" (31). The terror and fear of being killed not only by the insurgents but also by the armed forces is apparent throughout the novel. Kire also has vividly portrayed the distorted picture of Nagaland through curfews, rape, killings, beating of civilians, and firing at peaceful rallies which were witnessed daily by the Naga people. Such acts have created fear and panic among the masses and they cried out in horror, "This conflict is eating us alive" (Kire 122). Fear of the armed forces becomes apparent in this novel as well resulting in the creation of terror among the Naga people. The Naga people's trauma can be well understood with Neituo's statement, who because of targeting and torturing innocent men by armed forces, cries out, "They kill a few to put fear in the rest..." (Kire 67). This statement is reflective of the havoc and glooming tension persisting among the civilians as they are torn apart because of the two opposite powerful forces and the conflict between them, leading them to experience anxiety, fear and distress only.

In *The House with a Thousand Stories* during Pablo's first visit, when Mridul tells Pablo about an incident of secret killing and cautions him about the electric pole, both of them experience a sense of terror. Fearing to approach the pole, Mridul reveals that the villagers discovered the dead body of an ULFA militant's brother being hanged there. Brutality and horror of militancy are reflected in a casual chat between two cousins. This incident leaves a deep impact on Pablo which is exposed in his next visit to the village. Pablo begins to imagine the man who was mercilessly hanged to death by the secret killers under the electric pole many years ago. This

makes him feel a sense of fear while passing near the pole with Anamika in his next visit to his ancestral place. The dead corpse as well as the electric pole thus remains as a memory of horror in Pablo's mind just like in Mridul's and other villagers' minds. He expresses his fear in the following manner: "I was suddenly filled with a strange sense of fear for her and wondered if Mridul and the people in that village felt the same way—scared of an imaginary body. Scared of a body that had fallen with a thud right there, many years ago. Afraid of a portion of the ground which a blood-splattered body had drenched with blood" (Kashyap 130).

Similarly, memory is instrumental in depicting the trauma of violence and the sufferings of people in Kire's novel as well. Freud stresses that people "suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident" (13). The protagonist, Mose's remembrance of the Japanese invasion and the fleeing of his family along with other members of the clan depict the traumatized memory of the past: "Mose could hazily recollect this period of his life... they had trekked several jungle paths and camp in the woods. He had one vivid memory of seeing a war plane crash with a deafening sound..." (Kire 24). Furthermore, at a young age, Mose's act of joining the 'underground' army is also a result of his traumatic experience of violence and struggle for survival because he himself has witnessed the worst situation like starvation, burning of villages, sexual abuse and raping of women and so on. He becomes more disturbed after his retirement from the insurgent group by witnessing the merciless killing of the Naga people by the armed forces and also the faction killing which has already degraded the established moral value of the Naga society: "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (Caruth 91-92). Mose's traumatic experience in his early life as well as later part demonstrates the relevance of this statement.

Again, in Kashyap's novel Mridul's revelation to Pablo of having a constant fear of the same incident and his continuous thinking of the electric pole, and the hanging corpse as well as other killings in the village clarifies his condition of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He tells Pablo, "I get really worried when dogs bark like that. . . 'Reminds me of the man who was hanging upside down from that electric pole like a bat," (Kashyap 96). According to Caruth, PTSD "reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, physically and neurobiologically by an event that

it cannot control" (58). This clarifies that external violence can cause the most damaging effect on the human psyche. Further, Mridul's horror can be well understood when he narrates to Pablo the incidents of killings continuing in the village: "More killings are taking place every day... The East Bengali villagers who use the Pokoria River most of the time say that they have started finding body parts of unknown human beings at regular intervals, almost every fortnight or so. They are so scared that they haven't even informed police" (Kashyap 53). Another incident that has shook Mridul is the killing of Hiren Das' whole family who was a surrendered militant. Pablo describes Mridul's condition in the following way: "I saw the horror writ on his face when he came out" (103). Seeing the condition of Mridul, Pablo "screamed, looking at his dazed face" (104) and started weeping. Such victimhood of innocent Naga people due to violence is reflected through the family of Mose in Kire's novel. The shooting of Mose's grandmother Khrinenuo while working at the field with Vilau shattered Mose's as well as his community's life: "Vilau was washing her hands by the stream when she heard gunshots ring out... At the edge of the field, someone was lying in a dark head... the bullet that had entered the back of her head had killed her" (Kire 70). The fear of death and helplessness caused by violence hinder them to carry on their normal daily life which reflects the deterioration of the Naga psyche. People become traumatized by the killings of community members and young men in broad daylight. The following conversation between the protagonist and his neighbour reflects the frustration emerging from the deep psychological impact of violence on innocent Naga community people:

"You're right," Mose agreed. "The killers are too smart. In any case, no one dares to catch them."

"Everyone is afraid of them. That's a fact." The neighbour stated.

"Everyone is sick of it, all these killings. But no one has the guts to do anything about it," was Mose's reply.

"No", said the neighbour. "May be if we had guns too." They both know it was a lame idea" (9-10).

It is undeniable that the personal experience of terror and fear of the protagonist and the role of place are important in the trauma novel. In such a novel, as suggested by Michelle Balaev, examination of the role of place, "especially metaphoric and material value accorded to landscape imagery in the experience and remembrance of trauma, opens new avenues for a discussion of trauma's meaning for the individual and community" (159). The symbol of the electric pole itself creates more intense emotions that

explain people's loaded memories of brutality and perpetual fear and anxiety. The crushing of 'the golden laburnum flowers' under Army boots, blooming in front of the bamboo gate at Brikodar's house, metaphorically symbolises the forthcoming brutality on women. The behaviour displayed by Mamoni, Brikodar's ever-smiling sister, on seeing the army at her house and the surprise projected by Pablo on noticing her, reflect the horror of trauma that is endured by innocent women. Pablo describes the incident in the following way:

Mamoni had stepped down the veranda, sat in the courtyard and started to scream. She wouldn't stop, she kept screaming like a lunatic until she fainted. I saw the whites of her eyes; the irises of her eyes had disappeared. She was still sitting. I saw the pale yellow trail of urine sliding down on the courtyard. I had never seen anyone so scared (Kashyap 112).

As the narrative progresses, he learns that Mamoni had been raped by four military men the previous year when she had gone to wash clothes in the Pokoria river. For Mamoni this incident "emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 2). This disturbs Pablo in such a manner that his perspective about the laburnum flowers gets completely changed which no longer reminds him of youthfulness but of dread and defencelessness. Mamoni's "state of psychic helplessness" (quoted in Maclean 71) can be described as 'traumatic neurosis' which Freud regarded as "a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli" (31). The trauma Mamoni actually experienced is different from the trauma experienced by other characters in the novel.

The novel subverts the happy and auspicious events into gloomy incidents through family reunions that lead to rumours and gossiping especially on the occasion of Moina's wedding which reveals the real socio-political unrest and trauma of people in Assam. Moina's wedding is transcended by an ever-present sense of fear and terror because of the rumour that the groom's brother is a militant of ULFA. Helplessly everyone, including Moina herself, thinks about the worst consequences of being a family member of an active insurgent, ultimately leading the bride to commit suicide. As the people of the village have already witnessed instances where the families and relatives of insurgent members were mercilessly killed by secret killers, therefore, fearing the repetition of the same history with Moina and the family, Moon-baideo exclaims in despair, "It's better to cut out Moina into pieces and throw her body into the Brahmaputra than



marry her off to a groom whose younger brother is a rebel" (Kashyap 210-11). Moina's anxiety and fear of such dire consequences and her psychic helplessness force her to drink phenyl before the night of her wedding. According to Freud, "'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid" (12). The helpless locals become victims and are caught between two opposite forces. The same vulnerability of people can be seen in Kire's novel, where the Naga nationalists were blamed for any accidents in the army camps or involving military vehicles, leading to the harassment of innocent people as a consequence. Like rumours and gossiping in Kashyap's novel, Kire has employed 'whisperings' to picture the perilous condition of the Naga people. Even the basic human right to speech was compromised and being alarmed by the environment of tension and fear, people spoke in whispers disrupting their daily lives.

In summation, it must be pointed out that the novels while detailing the traumatic experiences due to violence and conflict describe extreme emotional upheavals of the characters. Truly historical in nature, both novels highlight political and social issues to reveal the trauma and suffering of the people of Assam and Nagaland. Throughout the narration, the novelists reflect on the unavoidable horrific historical events of their respective land and explore the psychological effects of traumatic experiences as consequences of such incidents on innocent people. In essence, this study has attempted to bridge the gap between the real-world pain experienced by the people of Nagaland and Assam and the literary portrayals of those experiences in *Bitter Wormwood* and *The House with a Thousand Stories*. There is a persistent and enduring issue of trauma caused by violence and militancy in the socio-politically disturbed regions of Nagaland and Assam. It is through the written words that the writers provide the opportunity to build connections, to bridge divides and to advocate for an equitable and compassionate society, where the trauma of violence and conflict be replaced by the healing balm of peace and understanding.

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