

## From Colonial Rupture to Everyday Violence: Cultural Trauma In Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* and Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*

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**Abstract:** Literature is a reflection of human life, culture, and imagination expressed through language. It explores universal themes such as love, suffering, identity, power, trauma, and resistance. It allows the readers to understand both individual and collective histories. Through various genres and forms, literature not only entertains but also challenges social norms, preserves cultural memory, and deepens emotional and intellectual awareness.

Northeast Indian literature represents the rich cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of one of India's most distinctive regions. It comprises eight states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. The literature of the northeast emerges from a complex history shaped by indigenous traditions, colonial encounters, migration, and political movements. For a long time, northeast literature remained marginal within the larger framework of Indian English writing, but it has now gained critical recognition for its unique voices and perspectives.

Northeast literature is rooted deeply in oral traditions, myths, folktales, songs, and legends, which also reflect the lived experiences of tribal and non-tribal communities alike. Storytelling has traditionally functioned as a means of preserving collective memory, cultural values, and ancestral knowledge. The authors of this region draw oral narratives in their writings, thereby blending the past with the present and asserting cultural continuity in the face of rapid modernisation.

### INTRODUCTION:

The main themes of northeast literature are identity, belonging, conflict, insurgency, displacement, ecological consciousness, and cultural survival. The prolonged exposure to political unrest and militarisation has profoundly influenced the literature, giving rise to narratives that interrogate power, state violence, and historical silencing. At the same time, these texts foreground everyday life, resilience, and intimate human relationships, offering nuanced representations beyond stereotypical images of conflict. It is multilingual in nature, written in languages such as Assamese, Manipuri, Khasi, Mizo, Ao, Angami, and English. Translation has played a crucial role in making regional writings accessible to a wider audience, especially through Indian English. Major writers of the Northeastern literature are Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Indira Goswami, and Robin S. Ngangom, have contributed significantly to bringing the regional narratives into the national and global literary space.

In recent years, Northeast Indian Literature has emerged as an important field of study within postcolonial and cultural studies. The literature offers readers in understanding nationhood, identity, resistance, and resilience. As a literature grounded in memory, land, and community, it continues to assert the cultural and political significance of the Northeast within the broader discourse of Indian literature.

A central theme seen in northeast literature is the search for identity and a sense of belonging. Writers from the region explore ethnic, tribal, cultural identities, and cultural

trauma that have been marginalised in mainstream Indian narratives. Authors like Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Temsula Ao foreground indigenous worldviews and assert cultural importance through myths, oral histories, and personal memory. Writers like Indira Goswami, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Robin S. Ngangom, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, and Janice Pariat draw heavily on oral traditions, folklore, and ancestral myths as narrative frameworks. These elements are not merely aesthetic devices but as repositories of cultural memory and resistance.

The impact of political conflict, insurgency, and militarisation has been a major theme in the works of Temsula Ao, Jahnabi Barua, and Aruni Kashyap. They portray the psychological trauma, moral dilemmas, and social fragmentation caused by prolonged violence. Cultural trauma is closely linked with conflicts and violence. The collective wounds caused by displacements and historical silencing are documented under cultural trauma. Writers explore how communities remember violence and heal through storytelling, solidarity, and cultural practices. Works of Easterine Kire and Indira Goswami highlight the themes of resilience, emphasising survival, forgiveness, and communal endurance. The writers never fail to capture the region's natural beauty. Rivers, forests, mountains, and villages are depicted as sacred spaces intertwined with identity and memory. Mamang Dai is one of the most prominent literary voices from Northeast India. She is known for her works, which portray the indigenous life, memory, and the natural world. She was born in 1957 in Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh. She belongs to the Adi tribe and has worked as a journalist, civil servant, and writer. Her writings reflect the cultural traditions, myths, and ecological wisdom of her community while addressing issues of identity, marginalisation, and modernity.

Mamang Dai has contributed significantly to Indian English poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Her notable works include novels *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), *Stupid Cupid* (2009), and *The Black Hill* (2014), and the poetry collections are *River Poems* and *Midsummer Survival Lyrics*. She blends oral narratives with contemporary concerns with themes of memory, land, belonging, ecological consciousness, and cultural survival.

Temsula Ao is a distinguished writer, poet, and academician from Nagaland. She was born in 1945 in Jorhat, Assam, and belongs to the Ao Naga Tribe. She has had a long career as a professor of English and later served as the Chairperson of the Nagaland State Women's Commission. Her writings are deeply rooted in Naga history, culture, and oral traditions, while also engaging critically with themes of violence, memory, and social change.

Temsula Ao's major works include poetry collections such as *Songs That Tell* (1988) and *Songs That Try to Say* (1992), and a short story collection, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006). She has written ethnographic and cultural texts such as *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, which documents indigenous myths and folklore. Through a blend of oral narrative, realism, and ethical reflection, Ao's works foreground the themes of insurgency, cultural trauma, community resilience, gender, and the moral costs of conflict.

Cultural trauma, as articulated by Jeffrey C. Alexander, refers to the collective process through which a community interprets a historical event as a fundamental injury to its shared identity, memory, and cultural continuity. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory further deepens this understanding by emphasising trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence and returns belatedly through repetition, silence, and fragmented memory. Caruth defines trauma as an event that resists full assimilation into consciousness, returning in fragmented memories and narratives. Trauma seeks expression through indirect, symbolic, and disrupted forms of storytelling.

In northeast Indian literature, cultural trauma emerges from histories of colonial disruption, postcolonial militarisation, insurgency, ethnic violence, and cultural marginalisation. The writers Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao employ narrative strategies that align closely with Caruth's notion of belatedness and unclaimed experiences with broken

chronologies, spectral presences, recurring myths, and testimonial voices that oscillate between speech and silence. The fiction draws on oral tradition and indigenous myths to articulate what cannot be directly spoken, thereby transforming trauma into a shared cultural memory.

*The Black Hill* (2014) by Mamang Dai is a historical novel set in nineteenth century Arunachal Pradesh, which tells the story of Gimur from the Abor tribe and her love Kajinsha. The plot centers on the murder of a French priest, Father Nicolas Krick, and the execution of Kajinsha, blending fictional love with colonial violence. The story is set in mid nineteenth century, a little before the 1857 mutiny in North India, in which Mamang Dai introduces two tribes, Abor and Mishmee, who live in different parts of Assam, the area above the Brahmaputra and below Tibet. Tibet has been a forbidden land for a very long time, and a French priest who had a mission to go and set up a church, and from Assam, he had to find a route through the hills by himself.

It is also a story between two lovers who come from two different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Through their story, Mamang Dai takes the readers through the landscapes of their village. She introduces the readers to the faith they follow, the dreams they see, the omens they interpret, and the superstitions that dictate their lives. She also talks about the fear the tribes of the hill encounter with the arrival of the British. She brings out how the tribes come together to fight the British.

The novel discursively constructs cultural trauma by depicting colonial contact as a collective rupture in the life of the Adi (Abor) community rather than as a singular historical incident. In line with Jeffrey C. Alexander's argument that cultural trauma occurs when a community comes to view a historical experience as a fundamental injury to its collective identity, the novel presents British colonial expansion into the hill region as an event that destabilises indigenous social structures, territorial belonging, and modes of remembering. In the early section of the novel, Mamang Dai establishes the hill as a lived cultural space shaped by oral traditions and ancestral memory. The gradual arrival of the colonial administrators and missionaries disrupts this equilibrium, marking the beginning of a shared historical wound. The trauma is not immediately articulated but unfolds slowly, which echoes Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence. Dai's narrative structure reflects this belatedness through fragmented storytelling and shifts between communal memory and individual experience. The scenes depicting misunderstandings between the colonisers and the indigenous community, particularly surrounding land use and authority, illustrate how violence and dispossession are normalised before being recognised as loss.

The relationship between Gimur and Kanjinsha, developed across the novel, functions as a symbolic enactment of cultural trauma. The novel depicts the impossibility of reconciliation between colonial modernity and indigenous life. This unresolved ending reinforces Caruth's claim that trauma insists on repetition rather than closure. Consequently, *The Black Hill* operates as what Jeffrey C. Alexander would address as a carrier narrative of cultural trauma, transforming colonial history into collective memory while simultaneously asserting resilience through storytelling and remembrance.

Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) is a story collection about a widow's fascination with the Laburnum tree to the point that she wants it planted in her grave instead of a customary marble or granite tombstone. She goes to great lengths to fulfil her wish, antagonising her children and her kith and kin in the process. It is a short story collection containing eight stories, seven of which are set in the Naga community. The story collection articulates cultural trauma through intimate, everyday narratives that expose the long-term psychological and communal consequences of violence in Nagaland.

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, cultural trauma is a process through which a collective development comes to be recognised as a fundamental injury to its identity. Ao's stories

present insurgency and militarisation not as isolated political events but as enduring disruptions to social relations, moral frameworks, and collective memory. The stories are set against the backdrop of decades of conflict in Nagaland, and the text foregrounds how trauma becomes normalised within domestic and communal spaces.

The narratives of Temsula Ao closely relate to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly with her belatedness and repetition. The stories do not stage violence spectacularly; instead, trauma resurfaces through silences, routine conversations, and seemingly ordinary moments. In stories such as "The Last Song" and "An Old Man Remembers", the past returns in fragmented recollections, incomplete testimonies, and unresolved grief. This narrative mode reflects Caruth's idea of trauma as an experience that is not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence and that re-emerges indirectly through memory and narration. Ao allows trauma to persist, reinforcing Caruth's assertion that trauma resists closure and demands ethical witnessing rather than offering narrative resolution. The collection thus serves as a literary counter-archive that preserves collective suffering while asserting moral resilience and cultural survival.

The two works Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* and Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*, together map a continuum of cultural trauma in Northeast Indian literature, moving from colonial rupture to postcolonial everyday violence. In *The Black Hill*, colonial intrusion functions as a foundational trauma that fractures indigenous cosmology, land-based identity, and communal memory, producing what Jeffrey C. Alexander terms a rupture in collective identity. *Laburnum for My Head*, by contrast, shifts the focus to the normalised violence of the postcolonial present, where militarisation and insurgency infiltrate domestic and emotional spaces, extending trauma into ordinary life.

Despite their different historical moments, both texts employ indirect narrative strategies with fragmented storytelling, silences, oral memory, and retrospective reflection that align with Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a belated and unassimilated experience. Collectively, these texts function as carriers of narratives of cultural trauma, transforming suppressed histories into shared memory while revealing how trauma reshapes community identity across colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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