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Mnemonic Communities of Displaced Indigenous People: Northeast Indian Narratives of Cultural Memory

Athira Baburaj

School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Management

National Institute of Technology Karnataka

Surathkal, Mangalore

athirab1@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8750-8362>

Dhishna Pannikot

School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Management

National Institute of Technology Karnataka

Surathkal, Mangalore

dr.dhishnapannikot@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4772-7368>

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Abstract

The displaced indigenous people in Northeast India, belong to multiple ethnic groups scattered across the region. Most communities have a shared traumatic experience as the base of their collective remembering. Even though their relocation trauma resonates with others among the displaced, it does not surpass their strong ethnic predilection. Social processes of remembering establish the community by drawing and redrawing the boundaries of different periods or eras in its historical trajectory. Cultural memory plays a major role in revisiting and reforming the historical trajectory, especially in a space where cultural artefacts possess strong roots. Contemporary literature from the Northeast traces the trajectory of its history with the help of the available knowledge system and the lived-through experiences of ordinary Indigenous people. The study focuses on Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) and Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) as narratives of cultural memory in reconstructing the mnemonic communities of the indigenous population in Northeast India, helping them in the process of identification by confronting the hegemonic conflicting memories.

Keywords: Cultural memory, indigenouy communities, mnemonic communities, internally displaced people, northeastern identity

Introduction: Narratives of Cultural Memory

Cultural memory weaves together various fragments of the ‘past’ abandoned by history. Jurgen Habermas comments on the importance of personal memories for the process of individual identity formation. The identity of an individual is bound up with processes of socialization that depend on mutual recognition. That is coming to an understanding with others in language and intra-subjective understanding with oneself. George Herbert Mead’s work forms the basis of Habermas’ concept of identity. Building the “self- images by remembering their past actions and thoughts individuals come to what Habermas calls an “intrasubjective” understanding of themselves” (Steveker, 2009, p.77).

Jan and Aleida Assmann developed Pierre Nora’s notion of “site of memory” to the concept of cultural memory. Cultural memory encompasses the body of “reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch” (Assmann,1995, p.126). Jan and Aleida Assmann suggest that to restrict the decline of memories by forced forgetting, promulgated by the dominant power, memories, should be transmitted through cultural productions such as narratives, film, sculpture, and painting. This would enrich the theatrical performance of memory (Erll, 2005). Assmann (1995) called these narratives, which carry the remains of an ingrained “cultural past” as “kulturelle Texte” or “cultural text.” These are narratives of cultural memory that are “produced and remembered in a specific mnemonic society,” and consecutively reconstruct such societies. (Sarkar and Gaur, 2021, p.8).

Memory is said to be “collective” (Halbwachs, 1992), “cultural” (Sturken, 1997), or composed at social levels, which is beyond “individual recollection” (Olick & Robbins, 1998). To capture this idea, Zerubavel (1996) coined the term “mnemonic communities.” He asserted that “broader social structures, such as the family, organization, ethnic group, and nation, all engage in practices of commemoration (cooperative remembering) that serve to define a common identity and delineate the boundaries of a specific social institution” (pp.289-90). According to Zerubavel, mnemonic communities are people connected “by common frameworks of remembering and shared memories of past practices, identities, and collective meanings” (as quoted in Coraiola, et.al., 2018, p.50).

Collective memory tends to assume a specific mnemonic community, often the “nation,” but migration and displacement challenge the idea of a national “container” of memory. These challenges, often makes collective memory competitive over whose stories and experiences get to be told and remembered. Displacement results in identity discontinuity. For Homi Bhabha, cultural contacts and the experience of in-betweenness often felt by migrants and refugees generate new, hybrid identities that resist conventional categorizations and nationalisms.

Internally Displaced Indigenous Communities in Northeast India

The history of Northeast¹ India has been a history of migration. Before history was written, the migration flow was mainly from the eastern sides. The problem began when colonialism came to this part of the world—in 1826, almost a century after most other parts of India. The select novels, Easterine Kire’s *A Respectable Woman* and Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill*, mark the onset of colonialism in the hills of Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The British (referred as “migluns” by the indigenous people) imported its policy of isolating the territories it controlled from rival colonial powers by demarcating new frontiers. The disturbed environmental, socio-economic, and political changes further led to the massive internal displacement of its population. The displaced mass, their everyday lives, survival struggles, and rehabilitation woes have often remained invisible, outside the domain of public perception. The select novels open up diverse perspectives on displacement while resurrecting memories of displacement and rehabilitation through cultural memory.

Displacement involves various forms producing plural displaced subjects like migrants, refugees, internally displaced, exiles, diasporas, expatriates, and many more. Each category is different, and these differences change the position of the displaced subject and the nature of displacement experiences. Internally displaced population (IDP),² in the Northeast belong to multiple ethnic groups. Their relocation trauma resonates with others among the displaced, however does not transcend their strong ethnic predilection. Behind every diaspora are mountainous battles for representation in the embryonic stage. In the case of the IDP in Northeast, there are no diaspora formations because the displaced does not cross an international border. However, the compulsion visible in the IDP's to create an ethnic association or to be part of an ethnic group is directly proportional to the entitlement of tribal status which would make the displaced eligible for rights entitled to citizens. More than the desire for community bonding, the basic instinct for survival drives them towards such ethnic-bound associations.

A mnemonic community should undergo “an act or event that grounds the creation of a collective identity” (Coraiola, et.al., 2018, p.53). In the case of communities from Northeast, created after traumatic events, resulting from displacements, loss of home and a continued sense of instability, the realization of the birth of the community is grounded in ethnicity. Here ethnic identification tends to predominate victimhood. Being displaced doesn't help one to assert right to relief and rehabilitation. The ethnic identification³ of the victim is mandatory in providing legitimacy to the claim to right. The displaced community is caught in the act of remembering and forgetting that very moment in which it was created. The social processes associated with remembering establish the basis and transformation of the community by “drawing and redrawing the boundaries of different periods or eras in its historical trajectory” (p.53). Cultural memory plays a major role in revisiting and reforming the historical trajectory. The past transmitted to the present is embedded in “artefacts, routines, and cognitive frames that are not easily available in consciously framed mainstream discourses” (p.57). Cultural memory is capable of stimulating the memory preserved in bodies and places acquired by habit and convention.

Displacement causes one to be isolated from both place and time. However, as Nabanita Sengupta and Suranjana Choudhury (2022) points out, “memoirs, testimonies, and photographs have caused substantial alertness around and discernment of this crucial global phenomenon,” especially in recent times (2). The historical consciousness can deepen our understanding of how collective assumptions of place can create collective meaning. In Northeast India, “social formations” are indicated by “pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial transformations” (Biswas and Suklabaidya, 2008, p.17). The colonial strategies devalued native cultures which resulted in conflict between the indigenous communities and the British and caused massive internal displacements. Those who survive the conflicts including war, have memories of the traumatic past, which they share with their community members, and through these multiple retellings, memories achieve the “social framework” (Halbwachs 1992).

The region continues to remain an unacknowledged site of migration experience; however, recent years have been marked by the publication of many texts that have attempted to re-examine the history of isolation and resulting migration to articulate the question of victimhood. The study focuses on Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* and Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* as narratives of cultural memory in constructing the mnemonic communities of the displaced indigenous population in Northeast India, helping them in the process of identification by confronting the hegemonic conflicting memories.

Contemporary Literature from Northeast as Counter-histories

Contemporary Anglophone literature from Northeast India traces the trajectory of its history, both the colonial and the postcolonial period, with the help of the available knowledge system and lived-through experiences of the ordinary indigenous people. Literature of Northeast India bears testimony to the association of personal memories in the literature produced from the region. The works of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, or Robin Ngangom are recollections of the past that have significantly shaped their present in different ways. Transfiguration of the mnemonic space into a literary creation comes almost naturally to these 'Northeast' poets and writers because they grew up with memories and they cannot discard them. Being a society with a protracted history of socio-political conflicts, literature of the region naturally behaves more responsible in its mission of representation by capturing more unexplored and insightful glimpses of the invisible, latent or the marginalised.

Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) revisits the historical event of the Battle of Kohima (1944), which is reconstructed through the memories of the people surviving through the war. Kire vocalizes the importance of giving the insider perspective (the voice of the native) through the novel. The novel is Kevi's journey of fashioning herself to become a "respectable women." It traces the evolution of Kevinuo from childhood to adult where she "negotiates various instances from her life and matures with self-respect" (Deekshith, 2022, p.25). The novel features the formation of her identity as a respectable woman, associating and dissociating ideals from the innumerable tales of her ethnic community. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part reflect the oral literature tradition, wherein Kevinuo's mother Khonuo (aka Azuo) narrates her memories of the Battle of Kohima⁴. The second part is Kevinuo's evolution, how the stories of her community mould her identity. The third part reflects how she navigated life to cast the happenings to her suits.

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) is a work of fiction woven around two historical events — a French priest's mysterious disappearance⁵ and the execution of a Mishmi⁶ tribal for his murder. Dai's concern for the absence of the period in the history of the Northeast becomes a recurrent motif. The sense of erasure of one's cultural and socio-political identity in the face of colonisation runs through the novel. These narratives strategically localize the cultural past for Northeast posterity. They depict the indigenous communities as forcefully displaced from their ethnic worlds with the emergence of British colonialism and the advance of Christian missionaries in the region. The impact heightened in the post-independence era with the development projects of the nation-state and its attempts at integration of these hitherto isolated tribal lands. This has led to the marginalization and hybridization of the multi-hued cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities of the region. The threat of extinction of age-old folk culture, traditions and beliefs has led writers of this region to retreat to the past to retrieve memories of the primitive way of life.

As narratives of cultural memory, the novels undertake to restore the sense of place and thereby construct a space that could stimulate intrasubjective conception that is distinct and unique to every individual. This is to regain the identity of those who are either physically or emotionally displaced from the idea of their homeland. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (2011) points out in her essay "Narrative as An/Other History or His/Story Otherwise" that "through fiction, memoirs, testimonies, individual and collective memories one could weave together the fragments of the moment" (p.20). These moments can be traced in the displacement narratives from the Northeast, and as Battacharjee advocates, there can be found an "interlocution" between the text and the context. This interlocution, she asserts, "opens up a space for dialogue between multiple histories and identities" (p.21).

Easterine Kire, exhibits the "interrelation between place and people, memory and history, tradition and modernity, through her fictional world" (Sarkar and Gaur, 2021, p.3). She

is keen to observe the historiography of a lost time and express the memories from her community's elders. This is then manifested in her indigenous oral historiography project named "peoplestories." The exceptional happenings of the everyday life in a time of war and conflict acquired a space in it. Peoplestories are the real stories of people; but "folklore permeates the cultural ethos of these stories" (p.4). These unwritten, unacknowledged, and often ignored voices become an essential repertoire of information in retrieving the Naga past.

Mamang Dai in her writing celebrate the nature, the mountain, the river and the people with their distinct ethnic culture. She says that if there is a "northeasternness" in literature from the Northeast it might be in the "depiction of landscape" since they "share a geographical continuity" (Mallck, 2019, p.2). Folk culture and oral knowledge passed down by the village elders, and the shamans (traditional healers) as custodians of collective tribal memory are recalled in the novel. She was a journalist before she became a full-fledged writer. There is a journalistic detailing in her narration. Her writings are records of life in the Arunachal hills. Along with the people and the landscapes hidden histories crept in her narratives.

Mnemonic Narratives as Deconstructing Hegemonic Colonial Discourses

Writing has a testimonial dimension: documenting and registering past histories and making them present, it makes literature's role crucial in constructing, contesting and disseminating cultural memory. The novels *The Black Hill* and *A Respectable Woman* blow the lid off the injustices of colonial history. These texts are responses to particular historical circumstances in dominant discourses that excluded the majority's perspective, especially the displaced indigenous population. The travellers' diaries, government documents, handbooks for male settlers, and colonial literature from the colonial period constructed an image of the Hill's people as savage and benighted. The select narratives deconstruct such notions laid out by the colonial discourses. In the novel, *The Black Hill* along with Gimur and Kajinsha story, is the embedded narrative of French priest, Father Krick's journeys to accomplish the Tibet mission⁷. Dai questions the authority of travel narratives of the French missionaries which deliberately excluded the real life of the tribal communities they encountered during their Tibet mission.

Kire's narratives of cultural memory, are accounts of events situated in specific time and space, they present how people make sense of, and narrate historical facts and events in their day-to-day realities. Cultural memory not only reflect but also constitute communities of memory. It is one of the most powerful forms of enacting reality. Cultural narratives are capable of bringing a linguistic, semiotic, and performative order that connects the past, present, and future of a community. Through the recurrent retelling of mnemonic narratives, the displaced from Northeast learn how to think about their world. These stories inherited from the past help the displaced, make sense of their collective realities.

A community's collective memory exists in the form of shared narratives about the past called mnemonic narratives. The select cultural memory novels are mnemonic narratives as they help make sense of and recreate the social realities of the displaced populations in the Northeast. Mnemonic narratives are political instruments that can generate continuity and discontinuity with the collective past of a community. The novels serve as mnemonic narratives as they provide the context against which the identities are constructed and hence are fundamental in constructing mnemonic communities. Mnemonic narratives encompass the memories recollected along with indicating how a community remembers its collective past. It is by telling stories, the tribal communities, especially the Angami⁸, the Abi⁹ and the Mishmee establish, organize, and share, within and between mnemonic communities, the hidden facts of the past. The stories thus shared informs the community, the reality of the often-altered historical facts. Coraiola, et al., (2018) suggests that these "narratives convey meaning and significance, as well as emotional and ideological contents associated with each mnemonic

episode” (p.58). The narratives thus help the community to recollect and reconstruct the past and thereby regain their lost identity.

Restoring Ethnic Life-worlds in Northeast India

Cultural configurations in Northeast stem from ethnicity. In the past, ethnic and religious affiliations helped individuals find their identity, organized kingdoms and clans used these identities to defeat their neighbors. The dominant ethnic culture represents itself as “the culture” and “tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range” (Clarke, et. al., 1977, p.12). Other cultural configurations “will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign - its hegemony” (p.12). According to Clarke et al., subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with the dominant culture. In the Northeast, for long periods, multiple cultures coexisted and gradually started negotiating the spaces and gaps in the dominant culture, making inroads into it. Ethnicity, religions and values have a powerful impact on the people's consciousness and have provided enduring symbols of identity to various groups of people in the region. The unification of secular and democratic forces after Independence could have united the diverse sections and communities of the region but the major neutralizing factor was the age-old suspicion that almost every tribe has against the other and between the peoples of the hills and the plains, and the indigenous population against the migrants. This had sustained limited social contacts amongst the inhabitants and isolated the indigenous population and enterprising migrants. Every tribe or group in the Northeast developed its word to denote the outsider. Thus, in the Assam plains, the outsiders¹⁰ are called “Bangals” or “Bahiragats,” in Manipur¹¹, “Mayangas,” in Mizoram¹² “Vais,” and so on. These terms are often derogatory and are found in folklores and songs belonging to different ethnic groups (p.56).

The novel, *The Black Hill*, describes many instances of inter-tribal feuds. The central character, Kajinsha had grown up in an environment of war and death. Steeped in isolation, the tribes in one valley, viewed their neighbours across the valley with suspicion and dread. Claims over “land, possession of rivers and streams and ownership rights to hunt and fish, regularly erupted into bloody, inter-tribal feuds” (Dai, 2014, p.7). One summer night Kajinsha had woken to the “cries of men and women fleeing” to distant hills, like “helpless spirits even as attackers of a neighbouring clan” attacked them (p.7). Mass displacement of people in fear of inter-tribal conflict were evident even among the ancient societies.

Displacement is “not the climatic point of ethnic conflicts; it... is the continuation of ethnic and community conflicts in the region” (Kumar, 2008, p.35). When people cross and renegotiate their political and cultural identities, cultural borders are redrawn and communities get reconstructed. The different patterns of migrations and cross movements engender “a multiethnic, multilingual region caught in conflagrations of identity crises” (Moral, 2013, p.118). IDPs, as a “mnemonic community,” have a shared experience of pain from the man-made conflicts including war, other natural disasters and resulting forced migration, a common source of their memories of the homeland. However, the way they remember their homeland, and view the possibility of return, varies because IDPs represent a heterogeneous community with a complex socio-economic configuration. IDPs in refugee camps and other temporary settlements live in a similar environment; therefore, their memory is preserved in everyday communication. However, their memories are also affected by official narratives like school curricula, media, and cultural texts. A regional philosophy or movement does not bind Northeast India. They follow a traditional social order where people have a sense of belonging only to a village, a hill tract or a valley. For instance, the Angami tribes or the Adi or the Mishmees tribes are portrayed in both the novels as communities deeply attached to their hills than most other things. Through moulding cultural memory, contemporary literature help

extend their spatial consciousness beyond a village, a hill or a valley to that of the Northeast or the nation.

Cultural memory creates the mnemonic reality of the world which provide the frameworks within which the world should be remembered. It is true that “every act of remembering is, in itself, a political act” (Coraiola, et al., 2018, p.60). People recollect memories within groups based on “available collective structures of remembering” (Halbwachs, 1992). To remember is to belong in the group, to reconnect with other members and their way of remembering, and for the internally displaced it opens up a medium to make sense of one’s own reality and how to overcome the trauma emerging out of their displaced existence, using specific categories and schemes of remembering.

In *A Respectable Woman* the narrative implicitly explains how the colonialist manipulated the natives into fighting the Battle of Kohima and later made them believe that the loss they suffered of war was supplemented with the modernity that swept Kohima¹³ post-war. Nandana Dutta (2012) asserts “modernity” for accommodating for “mobility” and at the same time putting implausible “restraints” on them (p.9). The modernity that spread escalated internal mobilities in Kohima, followed by resistance to mobilities from host societies and modern political formations. She suggested that with migration, the residence of the “stranger” within a society paved way for the “construction of identities,” and that the “colonial modernity project was responsible for the dissemination of ideas of the modern self–agency, helpful knowledge, vernacular education, and female education” (p.14).

Creating shared memories, beliefs and traditions is a unique characteristic of human communities. Kire's writing bears a sense of nostalgia—for a lost home and homeland brought alive through her writings. When Kire writes about home, her sense of her community dominates. She prefers to identify as a Naga more than an Indian, despite embracing the Indian culture. In an interview by Kim Arora, published in the *Times of India*, Kire says:

We will always feel we are Nagas. There is a vast cultural difference. Nevertheless, we can embrace India and understand Indian culture ... because of the history and culture, you'll never really be Indian. You'll always be fully Naga in your mentality ... we should actually build up on that—the levels of belonging, the levels of Indian-ness. (Arora, 2012)

Cultural symbols and traditions of the tribal societies are explored in both novels to cultivate a sense of shared indigeneity, culture and heritage. There were strong beliefs in spirits among the communities. Kevinuo’s grandparents (Atsa Bonuo and Apuosta) narrated to her stories of the warrior spirit, Keshudi. Genna days were observed in the village when any work was considered taboo. There is mention of ‘shaman’ as the “catcher of dreams” in *The Black Hill*. It was believed that he could read dreams and tell stories that revealed inherent meanings about tribal lives. Gimur and Kajinsha shared stories they heard from shamans of their respective tribes. These narratives of shared indigeneity help the displaced build communion during relocation.

Cultural Memory in Reconstructing Mnemonic Communities of Northeast India

Kire’s *A Respectable Woman* is the outcome of the oral historiographic project, in which she documents the personal narratives and experiences of her family and community during wartime with sufficient assistance from the written historical documents of that time. Kire records the unknown and unacknowledged facts of the Battle of Kohima, the peoplestories of the battle, to relocate history in the quotidian, the personal, and the familial. Kire strategizes the oral storytelling into the body of writing in the fashion of oral historiography and creates an informal “history-telling” session where the mother, Khonou passes on the battle stories of

displacement, rupture, and survival to her daughter, Kevinuo. Triggering those “sites of memories” is an exercise to regain the sense of belongingness to a place and thereby the native identity. By telling stories, “communities make sense of the place and preserve their identity” (Chakraborty, 2016, p.120). This “conversational narrative¹⁸” – to use the term of oral historian Ron Grele (2003) – “is a portal into the historical consciousness” (44). The literary devices employed in the cultural memory novel reveal deep structures of Naga social life, which was displaced by home-grown and externally induced violence and atrocities perpetrated by the British and the Japanese and then by Indian armed forces.

A Respectable Woman portrays how the displaced population in the battle of Kohima is rebuilding their identities and regaining their land from the scratches of war. It seems to be a revolution for them, a new era to start and to cure the wounds of their displaced lives. As they undergo traumatic experiences in life, the identity forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community becomes internalised by them. It has become a significant mark of social differentiation and identity assertion and an essential tool of articulation for empowerment.

Whether internally displaced or part of the diaspora, relocation is traumatizing. It questions the sense of belonging and roots. Nabanita Sengupta and Suranjana Choudhury (2022) suggest that “the anxiety to be accepted and the fear of otherness remain dominant among the displaced” (p.5). Mnemonic narratives or narratives of remembering help the displaced in their process of identification as a community. Homi Bhabha, in the work “The location of Culture” (1994), defined the term “displacement” as the “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self” (p.216). This points to its “dual, hybrid, bipolar characteristics and its constant deferral” (Sengupta and Choudhury, 2022, p.2). And also “to the complexity entailed in identity construction vis-à-vis the process of displacement” (p.2).

Kire emphasises the impact of conflict-induced displacement in the lives of the natives of Kohima. Khonuo recovers and pass on her memories of the Naga sovereignty struggles¹⁴, post-independence, to Kevinuo. The novel traces great political changes in Nagaland, from accounts of the natives. It started when the British had “mapped our territories and divided lands between India and Burma” (Kire, 2019, p.57). The leaders organised protests against this action and refused to join the Indian union. Even the few educated Nagas felt “they had the right to fight for Naga sovereignty” (p.57). In response to the uprisings in Nagaland gaining momentum, the Indian government sent in armed police who began a reign of terror. They tried to “crush the movement for Naga sovereignty and started killing those who opposed them” (pp.57-58). Many people were being tortured and displaced in the “interior areas and whole villages were undergoing ‘groupings¹⁵’ as part of the Indian government’s strategy to suppress the freedom movement” (p.58).

Different phases of communal riots, episodes of ethnic cleansing, insurgency-related dislocations, and politically orchestrated uprooting produce a considerable mass of the displaced population in the northeast region. It is not just physical isolation but an internal sense of exile that affects them the most. Attempts to locate the voices of displaced communities that have been largely ignored and bypassed in the more giant corpora of representations can be seen in the literary narratives from Northeast India. Many writers from the Northeastern states are trying to deal with the issues of conflict in a more holistic and self-reflective manner, thus offering an alternative understanding of the region’s literary scenario. These narratives provide documentative details of the various facets of the region's prevailing status of peace and conflict. The writers from the Northeast share their commonality in dealing with the issues of conflict, violence, insurgency, sub-nationalism, and displacement; they also have distinctive characteristics in their narrative strategies, ideological overtone, and perspectives on social upheavals.

Kire's writings can be regarded as "Interfusal literature," a term used by Thomas King to define narratives written in English, but preserving the archetypal indigenous voice of the storyteller as well as traditional themes and oral discursive devices. The same motif comes alive in Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*. The novel's images, themes, and characters reflect Naga's oral literature. Kire's writing, dissolving strict boundaries between ethnography, oral history, testimonials, and storytelling, opens up discursive spaces to explore alternative framing of home and belonging for people in Northeast India. She has consciously resorted to replicating the narrative voices of the indigenous Naga storyteller, intending to rescue the oral traditions of her people from extinction. The images and metaphors are established to create awareness of nature and ecology, ethics, and principles, but primarily to guide the young who have to face multiple displacements and find a place in the community, especially in the turbulent times of war and conflict.

Remembering the past is a recurrent motif among the writers from Northeast India, as they believe the past binds people in a creative community by "shaping the historical consciousness and cultural identity" (Roy and Gaur, 2021, p.2). The Battle of Kohima, regarded as the Stalingrad of the East, is one such historical event during World War II in Nagaland which precipitated the unavoidable political and social changes in the lives of the Naga people. *A Respectable Woman* is a historical narrative of the Battle of Kohima that uses cultural memory to categorically represent the significant events of the war while systematically sidestepping the personal experiences of people either participating in the war or collaterally damaged by it.

There are quite several historical accounts available on the Battle of Kohima, such as Robert Lyman's *Kohima 1944: The Battle that saved India* (2006), Fergal Keane's *Road of Bones: The Epic Seize of Kohima 1944* (2010), Arthur Swinson's *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought* (2016) and so forth. These are stories of extraordinary courage and the folly of imperial dreams. However, what was to follow does not find a place in the narratives. During Japan invasion, people were mass evacuated from Kohima village to the villages of "Chieswema, Meriema, Rusoma, and Jotsoma" (Kire 2019, p.3). For those who returned after the war, it was not the same anymore; the "place was unrecognizable", there was "no house in the village [that] had escaped bombing" (p.9). The Marwaris¹⁶ who sold groceries in their town had abandoned Kohima and had no food to survive. The novel after that narrates how the people started rebuilding their home and their native, Kohima. In a passage Kire portrays through the lens of the little girl, Khonuo and her friend Neiseu, the images of men starting a new life from scratch. "Some were bringing in posts to make new dwellings, while others were dragging in house materials, such as bamboo and planks, and the woman were helping by digging and clearing the debris way" (p.10).

Forty-four years after the event, Khonuo agrees to recollect the battle with her daughter. Khonuo emphasizes the changes Nagaland underwent post-war and how the British had halved Nagaland between India and Burma, which necessitated the long South Asian insurgency¹⁷, creating a "state of exception" (Agamben 2004, as cited in Roy and Guar 2021, p.5). The novel journeys through Kevinuo's childhood to adulthood in a transformed Nagaland. Amidst the rapid sociocultural modernity, she questions the still exercised, traditional practices of Naga culture that "restrict the growth of women in Naga society" (p.5). While generating a sense of belonging to one's region and culture, Kire espouses cultural adaptation regarding hegemonic cultural practises in the Angami tribe.

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* is about Kajinsha, a young man belonging to the Mishmee tribe, who falls in love with Gimur, from the Abor tribe set in the late 1840s'. It was a time of change and disruption. The British are exploiting the inter-tribal rivalries and proxy wars to make inroads. They challenge old orders and stimulate the existing uneasy peace established by the innumerable and distinct local tribes. Northeast writing represents the varied indigenous

ethnicities and their dynamic cultures and re-establishes the ethnic identity. Mamang Dai's writings being representative of her own ethnic society is an attempt to retrace tribal history and culture and re-establish their ethnic identity and hidden past in the official history.

In her preface to *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land*, a non-fictional account of the northeast state, Dai emphasises the necessity to retrace the unnoticed cultural hues and the past histories. She states:

The history of our people, our origins and routes of migration remain a matter of speculation, based purely on the few recorded documents left by the early explorers. There are also specialized niches in our tribal heritage that may be erased forever if change is not assessed and negotiated carefully. (p.9)

Dai's knowledge on the available history of the Adi and Mishmee communities triggers her to re-imagine the past memory of the tribal society. The novel attempts to trace the routes of migration from Tibet to the Mishmee hills (Arunachal Pradesh) and vice-versa and exhibit the formation of communities around ethnicity. The ethnographic narrative style details the continuous displacement and relocation the communities undergo in search of better livelihood and their aspirations resonating the "American dream" getting shattered with the advent of colonialism.

The Black Hill presents the pre-independent scenario of the tribes of Northeast India. The immediate backdrop of the novel gives the insight into Dai's "imaginative correlation of the hidden past to the recorded history about a Mishmee Chief, Kajinsha, who is sentenced to death for assassinating two French Fathers, Krick and Augustine Bourry" (Lakshmi, 2019, 340). In addition to portraying the rich ecology of Northeast, Dai presents the cultural ethos, the ethnic origin and the account of migration of the Adi and the Mishmee tribes in the novel *The Black Hill*. The novel sets forth with the description of the Abors in Mebo, a closely knit race, valiant warriors, honour bound, privileged among the other tribal clans, refrain themselves from the strangers. The Tribes' urge to protect their territory of the land, river or the forest resulting in intertribal feuds has shaped their culture even more closed units avoiding strangers. The Tribes has lived an isolated life one with nature. The central characters, Gimur and Kajinsha represent the Adi and Mishmee Tribes respectively. Gimur recollect the origin stories of her, Adi (Abor) tribe. "The first wave of tribesmen came south from the harsh mountain passes, looking for new land, they found this clear space in the middle of dense forest... Then many clans lived together, but soon the founding fathers were afraid there would not be enough water for everyone, ...family groups eventually dispersed to settle elsewhere. But the name 'Mebo' remained, meaning "desire and nostalgia for the long-ago time when brothers had lived together" (Dai 2014, pp.26-27). Dai presents the origin and early settlement of the Mishmee tribe, while describing Kajinsha's childhood. Gimur and Kajinsha marry each other despite belonging to different tribal ethnic identities. Along the lines, Dai has also made a maiden attempt in documenting the tribal history of the Adi and Mishmee tribes' attempts to prevent the British invasion in their hills.

Anzaldúa concept of the "borderland" can explain the invisible borders between the ancient societies of the Adi and Mishmee tribes portrayed in the novel *The Black Hill*. The Mishmee Hills, the novel's setting, located at the north-eastern tip of India, in north-eastern Arunachal Pradesh occur at the junction of North-eastern Himalaya and Indo-Burma ranges. These were the hills where the border merge. As the "extension of the borderline which is not necessarily visible but can be felt, the borderland is inhabited by all those who do not inhabit the center" (Pereira 2015, p.182). Gimur and Kajinsha and their respective tribes are frontier men and women who grew up at the intersection of multiple cultures, including Anglo culture, being a member of a group of colonized people in their territory. Anzaldúa states it is

not a homely territory but a place of contradictions where “you fight hard to resist” (Anzaldúa 1987, p.194).

Frontier identity is often a nomadic, wandering identity that embodies an intermediate trans-cultural state, oscillating between the inner and outer space. Kajinsha is a nomad, like most men in his tribe; he belongs to the valleys and rivers. He can wander at will “travelling behind a wall of mist, find shelter with a friend, and disappear with the wind like invisible men who have no regard for boundaries laid down by any authority” (Dai 2014, p.106). Dai pictures the borderland between Arunachal Himalayas and Tibet, emphasizing it as a space for self-identification rather than a zone of cross-cultural interaction. The ambivalence of borderline consciousness is the impossibility of complete self-identification with any culture. By portraying the borderland, Dai is restoring the origin myths and legends of migration of her land and people. Along with she unfurls absurdity of uproars for an ethnic homeland accelerating every day.

Dai unravels the cultural instinct of the Tribes in resisting against the strangers through Kajinsha’s father. She narrates about the British advancements into tribal belt and identity issues the tribe faces as the British make efforts to integrate many ethnicities into the homogeneities of the nation state. The deployment of historical memory and the reading of past in convenient time and space impacted questions on identity. According to Featherstone (2005) “memory can also provide a provocative critique of historical practise” and the memory executions “can also be related to wider social and cultural narratives” (p.172) The official archive “merely records those aspects of an event to which the official in that time and place has access.” (Dutta, 2012, p.11). It is those things that people talk about and circulate among themselves but prefer to keep it unofficial, which contains their deepest feelings, opinions and experiences. Mamang Dai has travelled through such unrecorded memories to narrate the story of the Mishmee hills.

A Respectable Woman, following a non-linear narrative, discloses the past events in a fragmentary manner resembling the memory archive, reflective of how their lives have been disrupted and displaced by the war. Memory is a marker in the identity discourse that is instrumental in constructing displaced identities. The British documentation methods in the Northeast, like mapping, censuses, monuments and museums, which are also inscribed in the cultural memory were used in “conjuring” as Benedict Anderson explicates “the national idea in the imagination of a community” (Anderson, 1999, pp.163-86). Cultural memory breathes life into the Northeastern identities disrupted by colonial and post-colonial regimes.

Kire has opened up that she had used intricate details and personal accounts to firmly ground the story of *A Respectable Woman* in time and place. She said she interviewed many survivors, whom she called the “living books of history” and expressed their memories and “recorded the history they carry with them.” She gave a form and a texture to the memory tales of the war survivors about their traumatic past and their inflexible existence despite it. She intended to write historical and cultural memory novels because it allowed her to give a socio-cultural presentation of her community. She says her initiative to write such novels was because she felt “the insider’s voice was silent in all the historical narratives” (Arora, 2012).

As Foucault states, every regime of representation is a regime of power formed by the fatal binary, “power/knowledge.” The histories from and about the Northeast reflect the power regime over knowledge. The literature from the Northeast is an outburst against such representation. Powell (2012) claims that “rhetorics of displacement are deeply embedded in the resistances to the subjectivities inscribed for the displaced by those who have power over them,” and the colonial narratives have always side-lined the displaced through a process of “othering” where the blame is laid upon the victim (p.302). Particular notions of “citizenry” are established to dehumanize the displaced through “metaphors of savagery” (Powell, 2012,

p.302). The displaced are people whom images have for centuries persecuted. They are constantly questioned for identity in their homeland; for them, this is a constant reminder of their 'difference' and social exclusion and their plight to gain mainstream acceptance. The displaced use rhetorical methods like nostalgia, a sense of home and belonging, and return to speak back to those narratives.

Mamang Dai's writing is distinct by the eccentric and constant unravelling of memories of rivers and mountains, her growing up in Arunachal Pradesh and her lamenting of the extinction of ancient Adi traditions. When she traverses Adi community's oral traditions in her works, "memory functions as an instrument of not only connecting the present with the past but the whole tradition of orality continues because of memory by which folk narratives are retold from generations. Memory becomes a dynamic force for the continuance of culture and is thus embodied in culture" (Ghataraj, 2014, p.419).

The memory of Kire's and Dai's homelands is brimming with ecological memories; however, it also exhibits the memories of "bullets, killings, corruption and anarchy" in the state and the identity crisis people face due to their multiple displacements (Singha, 2016: 20). Memories associated with the sense of "rootlessness or homelessness" is often felt in the writings from the Northeast. Mamang Dai's concern for her Adi traditions being displaced by the infiltration of the white settlers is reflected in her attempts to record the history of the lost culture in the Mishmee Hill, throughout the narrative. The novel revives the unwritten history of Arunachal Pradesh, alongside recording the complex and porous northern Himalayan border¹⁹.

Through the personal renderings and intimate moments of family and community narratives, both the writers intertwine the personal with the political while bestowing on the readers important episodes from tribal cultural history. Both of the novels represent the cultural signs of the tribal intangible heritage in a symbolic embodied narrative space, from spirit sighting to traditional food, from different social taboos such as "genna days" to the indigenous belief system, which generates knowledge about the ancient ethnic worldviews in the contextual reading process which enables to approach with an inclusive perspective, the contemporary political scenario in Northeast. Literature as a "cultural production of knowledge" is an agency that "exercises cultures of memory and channels the knowledge of the past across generations, and promises permanency" (Roy and Guar 2021, p.6). In both the novels, the writers record the unknown and unacknowledged facts of the Battle of Kohima and the execution of the French priest, to relocate "history in the quotidian, the personal, and the familial (p.6).

Conclusion

The narratives of cultural memory are "cultural texts" to use Assmann's term, that are produced and recollected in specific mnemonic societies and in turn reconstruct mnemonic societies and communities. Cultural texts bring a new social order and a new spatiotemporal focus connecting the community's past, present, and future. It helps to redraw the boundaries and reshape the collective identity of the displaced community. The dynamics of collective remembering and forgetting are intermingled and integrated within complex narratives of cultural memory. The collective practices of remembering are influenced by dominant discourses and power structures that historically create, mnemonically sediment, and mythically moralize practices and meanings that determine social action within communities. Literature from the Northeast is unearthing the discarded experiences buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities suppressed by history. Identity is not rediscovered but produced through the retelling of the past through cultural memory.

The internally displaced indigenous population in Northeast resulting from war, ethnic conflicts, unscientific development projects, natural disasters and so forth undergo displacement multiple times. The select novels emphasise that the root causes of displacement, the survival struggles and rehabilitation woes, post displacement reverberates in the majority of displacement experiences. However, ethnocentrism in Northeast rivals against any regional community bonding, resulting in negligence of the concomitant attributes of collective identities. The narratives highlight the fact that even with history of colonization, Northeast remains a region of heterogenous cultures. It is important to understand and accept the distinctiveness of each culture to embrace a collective identity. The novels *A Respectable Woman* and *The Black Hill*, represent the distinct and unique cultural traditions and symbols of the tribal communities to foster true community ties among the displaced. The narratives restore an imaginary fullness to set against the broken rubric of the past. They provide an alternative history capable of retrieving the northeastern identity obscured and with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways set by the colonial discourses.

Notes:

1. Northeast implies the area's location on India's political map. Northeast India is the easternmost region of India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim.
2. Internally displaced person (IDP): Internal displacement is a form of internal migration where people are forced to move within their country of origin. IDPs are forced to flee their homes on the same grounds as refugees; however, they “cannot or choose not to cross a border.” Unlike refugees, they “do not have a special status in international law with rights specific to their situation” (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2021).
3. Ethnic identification refers to a person's use of ethnic terms and practices to identify oneself and relate to others in the ethnic community.
4. The Battle of Kohima (1944) is among the lesser-known battles of the Second World War. The Allied victory (British and Indian forces) was a turning point against Japanese troops in the far east.
5. French missionaries Nicolas Kirk and Augustine Bourry were killed on their way to Tibet in 1854. They sowed the first seeds of Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh. They were killed at the Tibet-Arunachal border region by a Mishmi Tribe chieftain. (“Arunachal: French Missionaries Krick and Bourry Remembered on Tibetan National Uprising Day”)
6. Mishmi (Mishmee is the spelling used in the novel) **are** tribal people mostly inhabiting [Arunachal Pradesh](#) in extreme northeastern India, near [Tibet](#) and Assam, speaking [dialects](#) of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.
7. The French missionaries were members of the Society of the Paris Foreign Missions, spreading across the globe to promote Christianity. Krick and Bourry wanted to reach Tibet, to promote Christianity, but in the 1800s, the only way there was through Northeast India—present Arunachal Pradesh.
8. The Angamis are a major [Naga ethnic group](#) predominantly inhabiting the [Kohima District](#) in Nagaland, Northeast India
9. The *Adi tribe* is a major *tribal* group of *Arunachal Pradesh* that mainly inhabit the East, West, and Upper Siang districts.

10. People outside one's ethnic group, mainly people who migrated from other parts of the country, are referred to as "outsiders" in the Northeast
11. Manipur is a state in Northeast India
12. Mizoram is another state in Northeast India
13. Kohima is the capital of Nagaland, a state in Northeast India
14. Nagas are indigenous tribes residing in the mountain frontiers of Northeast India and North-western Myanmar. Naga sovereignty struggles are armed ethnic conflicts led by the Naga National Council (NNC), which aimed for the secession of Naga territories from India.
15. Grouping and regrouping of villages was a counter-insurgency strategy used by the government to contain and defeat the insurgency in the district. Though the intention was to safeguard the towns from the insurgent groups, the forced displacement of people resulted in extensive dislocation of social and economic life.
16. Marwaris are natives of Rajasthan, in north India.
17. Various categories of insurgency impact the entire South Asian region except Bhutan and Maldives. (<https://www.claws.in/insurgency-as-a-spoiler-south-asian-context/>)
18. "Conversational narrative" is used by oral historian Ron Grele (2003) to define the oral history interview. It is said to be conversational because of the relationship established between interviewee and interviewer, and narrative because of its form of exposition-which tells, relates, or narrates a story.
19. The northern Himalayan border comprises the [Plateau of Tibet](#) and various Trans-Himalayan ranges, only a tiny part in the [Ladakh union territory](#) are within the territorial limits of India. (<https://www.britannica.com/place/India/The-Himalayas>)

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