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Time, Place, and Displacement: An Ecocritical Study of Trauma in the Cases of Gimur and Felanee.

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Abstract: Literature from Northeast India is a remarkable repository of crucial eco-narratives that weave together environmental history and collective memory. In *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (1988), Donald Worster advocates for a more inclusive historical narrative that incorporates ecological factors (292). Eco-narratives unravel the interrelationship between environmental and human histories as co-constructed. By default, displacement brings changes to cultural, political, and social landscapes due to human beings' intimate ties with place. Displacement, resulting from certain circumstances such as ecological disasters, development, or conflict, uproots an individual or a collective of people from their roots. This severing of connection to place is particularly traumatic for women, who serve as caretakers of the cultural legacy, ancestral heritage, and natural resources. In the context of Northeast India, eco-narratives of displacement and its consequential trauma find extensive portrayal in several literary works such as Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2014) and Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2011). These novels portray the disruptive impact of displacement on the symbiotic relationship that exists between people and their land, resulting in both ecological and cultural disruption. Gimur and Felanee, the protagonists of *The Black Hill* and *The Story of Felanee*, are exemplifications of significant subaltern voices that challenge erasure and marginalisation of themselves and their lands, and use narratives to assert their agency, as conceptualised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Linda Hogan's assertion that "what happens to people and what happens to the

land is the same thing" (89) in *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* sheds light on the experiences of women like Gimur and Felanee. This paper views Gimur and Felanee as essential representatives who serve as repositories of voices subjected to erasure and marginalisation, delineating the significant role of stories as crucial articulations of cultural, historical, sociological, and political forces. Through the lenses of displacement, trauma, ecocritical, and feminist perspectives, the analysis explicates a multilayered comprehension of the integration of environmental history with ecological history in literature from Northeast India.

Keywords: eco-narratives, place, displacement, trauma, women.

INTRODUCTION

The Northeast region of India is marked by a unique landscape, a rich biodiversity, and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. These aspects give the region a certain level of distinctiveness from the rest of the country. The different states from this region are generally stereotyped and collectively described as "the Northeast". The region has witnessed pivotal upheavals and transformations alluding to its history, culture, political landscape, linguistic developments, and sociological alterations, which still find significant positions in contemporary discourses.

Rampant in narratives by writers from Northeast India is the figurative and evocative presence of nature in folk narratives and literary explications. The contextualisation of place in these literatures transcends theoretical and conceptual paradigms, but is rather an immediate experienced phenomenon of the world around them. This literature explicates a conscious employment of the ecology, the land, and the spirits of the land as physical, psychological and emotional phenomena that contribute to the formulation and assertion of a distinct and legitimate identity entrenched in place and sense of place. As a result, literature from this region is extensively dictated by an interwoven network of natural, historical and cultural connotations with relation to the mechanics of interaction connecting the land and the people

Theories and concepts on politics of writing about the environment have found grounded reinforcement and extension through critical studies that redefine the aesthetics and politics of ecological concerns in women's writings. Gayatri Spivak conceptualised, through the subaltern theory, the politics of voice, silence, and

representation, addressing the historical silencing and marginalisation of women and shedding light on the potential of literature to carve an alternative repository that conforms to the subaltern figure and voice. Embodying the subaltern figures, these texts offer a groundwork for exploring the politics of writing and the employment of culturally significant thematic and structural systems of narration that contribute to the reconstruction of identity and history.

Narratives of place enable explorations of collective memory and embodied traditional knowledge about place and sense of place. Collective memory, as Maurice Halbwachs explicates in *On Collective Memory* (1925), has been further outlined by Lewicka in *Place Attachment, Place Identity, and Place Memory* (2008) as a succession of events remembered collectively by a community sharing and partaking in establishing and defining it. In Northeast India's literary context, collective memory can be considered as emerging "out of geographically bounded political contexts that are shaped by ongoing struggles over material resources and collective identity" (Keogan 47). The landscapes employed in this context serve as living entities, which become repositories of memory and agency. This encompasses transgenerationally established, shared, and ancestral knowledge, history, and stories of human and nonhuman aspects.

The incorporation of environmental history in historical narratives, as conceptualised in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (1988), Donald Worster suggests that environmental history "attempts to make history more inclusive in its narratives" (292). Additionally, John McNeill's *The State of the Field of Environmental History* (2010) focuses on the impacts of politics and culture, delineates how environmental history is shaped by political and cultural factors, thereby positioning human and nonhuman interactiintegral on as in the comprehension of the history of a place and culture. Therefore, studying the intersection of the cultural history of nature and the ecological history of culture functions as a decisive and distinct procedure in approaching narratives from Northeast India.

SITUATING DISPLACEMENT TRAUMA IN *THE BLACK HILL* & *THE STORY OF FELANEE*

Displacement trauma is an impactful and devastating experience extensively dealt with in literature and academic studies. It is inclusive of the psychological and physical ramifications resulting from forced uprootment from one's home or community due to factors such as conflict, political upheaval, or environmental catastrophes. These traumatic experiences cause disruptions to the individual's sense of

belonging to a place or community, creating an upheaval and perpetual psychological wounds. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman emphasises that traumatic events shift the dynamics of the link between individuals and their communities. Accordingly, survivors realise that their sense of self, worth, and identity extensively depend on their connections to others (214). This sheds light on the significant interruption upon one's sense of self and sense of belonging, and the significance of communal ties for the psychological well-being of an individual.

In the contexts of displacement, trauma studies position how forced migration or environmental devastation unsettle histories on individual and communal levels. Liisa H. Malkki discusses in *Purity and Exile* (1995) that displacement transcends physical dislocation and disturbance, but is a profound psychological and cultural severance from place that redefines identities and social existence (23). It can establish a profound sense of loss and disorientation in displaced people, as the accessibility of their cultural past and the certainty of their future are also lost. This spatial and temporal disruption leads to feelings of alienation in individuals as they lose a sense of stability and security, thereby interrupting their adaptability to new environments. In the case of Felanee and Gimur, readers are confronted with the coping mechanisms of displaced individuals, while also opening avenues for the exploration of the trauma of displacement on personal well-being and collective dynamics.

In *The Story of Felanee,* Arupa Patangia Kalita employs Assam's late 1970s turmoil as its backdrop, focusing on the socio-political upheavals entrenched with atrocious rebellions and ethnic hostilities. The novel delineates the psychological repercussions of ethnic violence, insurgency, and forced dislocation. Felanee, the protagonist of the novel, is born of a mixed descent, a Bengali father and a Bodo mother. The beginning of her life and its progression are marked with tragic incidents like her father's death during the Assam Language Movement and her mother's death in childbirth. Despite the unfortunate series of events surrounding her birth, Felanee embodies survival. Even though she is thrown into a pond, she is rescued and adopted by Ratan, a distant relative. Felanee's tragic birth and the collective tragedy faced by the people of Assam during that period became a human manifestation of the tragedy of the environment during this time of unrest.

> Everything that bloomed was destroyed, the fragrant sandalwood forest was plundered by illegal traders, the peacocks and spotted deer were mercilessly killed for their flesh until they were extinct. All that remained now was emptiness, despair, wanton destruction, a deep silent void (8).

Her whole life is deeply affected and impacted by the Assam Anti-Foreign Movement (1979-1985), which aimed at chasing out the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. The movement robs her of a normal life, a life with a family and home, resulting in devastating personal losses, including her husband, her baby, and her home. These experiences profoundly impact her mental well-being, particularly her constant struggle with her later state of displacement and the haunting memories of her tragic past. Home becomes a problematic concept for Felanee because home is tied to cherished memories of her past, rendering it emotionally challenging for her to leave. This place, where they carved a home, represents a space where several events took place—her grandparents' meeting, her parents' love, and her own marriage. However, they have to leave their village in search of safety and to survive; they pass through overgrown fields and valleys which have become unkempt, and the rice fields which were once lush and green have now become abandoned (25). Their memory of the home they once had has now become their only connection with their homes, but with the unrest perpetually taking place, they can no longer dream of returning to a completely shattered home; therefore, they can only create a sense of home through memory and narratives.

Felanee endures multilayered violence which have impacted her psychological well-being. She, along with many others, is forced to leave all their accumulated possessions behind, signifying a severance from their tangible representations of shared life and memories with their families. In the case of Felanee, her home is destroyed by a devastating fire, her husband disappears mysteriously and is later found dead, and two neighbours are murdered. Amid this devastation, Felanee and her son Moni seek refuge in a pond, symbolising their helpless situation. As a result of these experiences, she becomes psychologically distressed and goes through hallucinations and vivid memories of violence, which haunt her throughout her difficult journey in the refugee camp and beyond.

With the ongoing conflicts and unresolved disputes, Felanee cannot even dream of returning to her ancestral home, and the notion of revisiting their village remains a threat to their life for survivors like Felanee. While some other refugees in the novel return home or move to urban areas, Felanee has no means to do the same. She has no family to return to, and has no means to start a new life either. The consequences of Felanee's traumatic experiences (PTSD) are reiterated clearly in the conversation between her son Moni and Bijoy. Moni expresses her dejection as everyone believes Felanee is "half-mad", to which Bijoy responds that their Maina has also become the same, pointing at people and things while muttering to herself (46). As Judith Herman

explicates in *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma is not situated in a vacuum, but is a complex, multilayered phenomenon that deeply impacts the victim's sense of self and their sense of place in the world (7). The novel portrays several female characters like Felanee, Bulen's wife, Jaggu's wife, and Phool, who are embodiments of the collective suffering of the people, specifically the integrated suffering of women and the environment due to social and ecological crises:

> People were crying in anguish as they rushed back to their homes. It was as if someone had felled an ancient tree. And suddenly the birds had nowhere to go. They filled the air with their cries, having lost their nests with their little ones inside. Utter chaos reigned.

Kalita establishes a comparison between the displaced people and the displaced birds, fighting for refuge as their homes are destroyed, rendering them homeless. Similar to these birds, Felanee and her husband's home and their field are also destroyed due to the unrest. Despite these challenges, Felanee shows remarkable strength, learning to adapt to her helpless situations. Through Felanee, "the throw away–all her life" (9), Kalita sheds light on the reality of ethnic identity, positioning the significance of fundamental humanity during societal conflicts and upheavals.

Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* is set in Arunachal Pradesh, India, during the 19th century, and explores the lives of its indigenous characters against the backdrop of colonialism, cultural shifts, and environmental changes. Dai uses the landscape and temporal shifts to underscore the trauma of displacement and the enduring connection between the people and their land. She skillfully employs the oral storytelling tradition, interwoven with references to myths, beliefs, rituals, and traditions, encapsulating the Indigenous consciousness of a spiritual connection that binds all elements of creation.

In *The Black Hill*, Dai delineates pre-independent India, giving life to the history of the *Abor* tribe and *Mishmi* tribe, whose equilibrium was disrupted by the intrusion of strangers. With her re-narration of the historical past of "the black hill", she transports her readers back to the past of intertribal conflicts with the overarching presence of colonial expansion. The novel touches on the spatial and temporal deconstruction and reconstruction as a response to colonialism, where the deprivation of the colonised body and their land is equated with being subjected to expropriation and cultural marginalisation. Through this depiction, Dai establishes the reclamation of their land as integral to acknowledging and retelling its historical narratives.

Postcolonial understanding of cartography underscores the Eurocentric concept of power, control, and knowledge through geographical and political approaches. In "Mapping the Land/Body/Subject" (2002), Harry Garuba remarks that mapping symbolises colonial power dynamics as maps and charting of new territories find significance in postcolonial studies, as colonialism was extensively founded upon spatiality and subjectivity: seizing spaces and controlling subjects (87). *The Black Hill* is a significant example, where the power of the British disrupted the solitude of the black hill with the onset of war and suffering in a land where the inhabitants had always sheltered a strong sense of place (Dai 224).

The dispossession of the natives in *The Black Hill* is equated with a loss of identity and belonging. For them, land is depicted as a place of spiritual ownership and rest, as Kajinsha's father asserts that if a forest is cleared by a man, with a house and cultivation established, the land belongs to him and becomes an extension of his identity (Dai 101). However, for colonisers, the land is an object for their "mercantilism", as they believe that governmental control over land would lead to economic prosperity (Burney 18). On the other hand, the natives do not exploit the land for their economic gains but consider it a living entity.

> We read the land. The land is our book. Everything here on this hill, the grass and rocks, and stones is saying something. And what falls from the sky-rain, thunder and lightning- are also the voices of the spirits telling us something. It is how we have learnt what is good and what is sweet or bitter, by living here and remembering what happens during the day and the night, every day for hundreds of years (140)

In all these political upheavals, Dai portrays the character of Gimur, whose existence is marked by both physical and cultural displacement. Gimur rejects the beliefs and traditions of her clan, which are considered unquestionable. This depicts her internal conflict with the acceptance of their traditional values.

Gimur's character represents a sense of "exile" and "homelessness"; her displacement is both physical and psychological. Gimur's life witnesses a perpetual sense of displacement in which her relocation with Kajinsha to a new land symbolises a deeper cultural and geographical displacement. Gimur's life is marked by a desire to "go beyond" (50), always questioning her connection to her homeland, manifesting as a constant conflict with the ingrained cultural values she finds confining. In this initial stage, Gimur represents a state of turmoil, questioning the values of her village and criticising the violence associated with the land. She questions how a mere physical landscape could instigate such emotional ties and hostility towards others, as men fought and killed each other, blood had been shed, and brothers had become enemies (66-67).

Ultimately, with certain circumstances that Gimur faces, she grows to carve a deeper connection with the land and all the natural elements. Gimur embodies a woman caught in the chaos of a male-dominated world, disrupted by war and violence, which eventually led to the death of her husband. Amid these upheavals, she finds no sense of belonging anywhere except the Mother Earth, which has been enveloping her. Due to colonial expansion and intervention, several people were displaced, and many pockets of their land were snatched from their hands by the colonisers, who exploited the land for their economic gains. However, Gimur does not allow the loss of her sanctuary, the black hill, and her husband, Kajinsha, to the colonisers to mark the end of her story. These losses instead mark the beginning of a new chapter, where she finds complete union with nature and transforms into "earth and Kajinsha is the sky and we [they] have looked at each other and will look at each other like this for a million years" (257). Her difficult journey amidst the greater political unrest underscores the different dimensions of displacement, emphasising the strong bond between land, identity, and cultural preservation.

TEMPORAL CONSTRUCT

Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) that trauma is characterised by an "absolute temporal disjunction" (61) where linear time cannot integrate the traumatic past as it persists as a haunting memory. Traumatic experiences cause a disruption of linear time, resulting in fragmented or cyclical representations. As a result, characters may experience flashbacks, fragmented memories, or constant reliving of traumatic events, which embody the disorientation and confusion caused by experiences of trauma. This interplay between past time and present time is integral in trauma literature as the experiences of trauma frequently seep into the present, affecting characters' perceptions of time and reactions to the present. This temporal overlap contributes to the perpetual sense of suffering and unresolved trauma. Moreover, in both novels, Dai and Kalita position individual traumatic experiences within broader historical, political, and cultural contexts. These temporal constructs mirror the traumatic experiences of Gimur and Felanee that intersect with cultural and historical shifts. As suggested by Dominick LaCapra in the concept of "working-through" trauma, he posits that the past continuously intrudes into the present, disrupting the process of recovery. LaCapra states in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) that the trauma of the past intrudes into the present, and the past can never truly fade away. (74).

In *The Black Hill*, the prologue and the abandoned hut are repositories for the preservation of voices and stories, establishing a sense of spiral temporality that enables a dynamic shift between the past and present. This temporality interconnects the "past time" originating from their ancestral origins and culture with the "present time" of the present-day community. Dai creates a narrative paradigm, introducing a sense of timelessness through a master storyteller in the prologue. This narrative voice re-establishes the importance of oral storytelling, which is marked by a spiralling temporality that establishes continuity to these stories within a landscape blending myth and history.

The Black Hill challenges Western linear historiography through a spiral time to recount the political and cultural history of her people. This spiral temporality, established in the Prologue, demonstrates the timelessness and endurance of the story Dai seeks to convey in her novel. Dai creates a bond of interaction between the reader and the writer, establishing a distinct cultural essence that symbolises the non-linearity and perpetuity of eco-narratives. This method allows her to reimagine and recount "lost stories" that have been erased or forgotten, engaging her readers in her narrative realm and countering defamiliarisation.

In her depiction of colonial intervention and consequential exploitation of the people of the land through dispossession of land and displacement, Dai creates a sense of temporal disjunction to delineate the presentness of the colonial past that wreaked havoc in the Northeast. Gimur's suffering and loss are depicted through the introduction of a sense of orality established in the prologue. This sense of orality that perpetuates in the novel creates a sense of temporal disjointedness that positions Gimur's suffering as a living memory enmeshed in the collective memory of the people, reflecting a cyclical Indigenous existence. Moreover, the shaman's character explicates living words and narratives passed down through generations. Thus, Gimur's comprehension of time is encapsulated in the shaman's wisdom:

> …in every life there is a turning point when, suddenly, the records of past deeds—all the words, thoughts and dreams and everything else that moved a person along a certain path—all of these would one day be placed before them. This is time standing still, the moment of choice. And after that felt Gimur, there remained only one thing to do—fly (49).

The spiral temporality is reaffirmed when Gimur and Kajinsha realise the timelessness of their story, which will live on even in the absence of written documents of their history. In the midst of her losses, Gimur's Indigenous beliefs enable her to see Kajinsha's death not as a tragic end to their story but as transcendence, establishing their story as an enduring presence in the living memory of her people. This perspective sheds

light on the enduring nature of oral narratives and their role in the preservation of cultural and ecological consciousness.

Meanwhile, Kalita's narrative in *The Story of Felanee* incorporates Assam's turbulent history, marked by ethnic conflicts and insurgencies. Resulting from the traumatic experiences of this upheaval, the traumatised characters experience temporal shifts. These temporal shifts reflect the haunting legacy of these events on both the people and the land, as is delineated through the psychological disruptions experienced by characters like Felanee and Bijoy's Maina. The environmental devastation reflects the socio-political upheavals, establishing a connection between human and ecological systems. Kalita's depiction of the Assam Movement of the 1970s and 1980s through Felanee's experiences reveals the integration of environmental history in socio-political history.

Memory in the novel connects the past with the present, personal with collective history, and human and environmental suffering. The characters' recollections allow readers access to their individual histories, which in turn also shed light on broader socio-political dynamics. As Van der Kolk explains in *The Body Keeps the Score* (1995), traumatic experiences are remembered differently from narrative memories. In this state, memory loses coherence as they are preserved as vivid sensations and images (253). When Felanee visits the market and sees tender drumsticks, her mind immediately takes her back to the past, causing her to relive her traumatic past, where her fond memories of her husband reside with memories of her tragic past (92). Even a simple word like "attack" triggers her delirium as the term had a profound effect on her. The word seems to ignite and spread like fire among the people of the novel who are victims of trauma (155). In this non-linear timeframe, Kalita enables her characters to delve into their traumatic pasts, as exemplified by Felanee's reflection on her experiences: she shivers at the thought of the past, shedding light on the painful events she has witnessed, including stepping over a body (155). This non-linear approach opens a multilayered exploration of how individuals and communities experience, process, and cope with their histories..

The narrative in *The Story of Felanee* employs a cyclical temporality mirroring the natural cycle of seasons, thereby emphasising the cyclical and enduring resilience of nature. Although violence and displacement extensively seep into the pages of the novel, they serve as a contrast to the cycle of destruction and rejuvenation that nature is associated with. This cyclical construct sheds light on the resilience inherent in both

the human and natural worlds, a quality exemplified by Felanee and the renewal of the environment in the novel.

Moreover, the forced migrations to which the characters were subjected led to a critical disruption of the people's connection to their land, leading to fragmented ecological, geographical and communal identities. This displacement leads to a disconnect between the spiritual owners of the land and the environment, leading to environmental degradation that disrupts the temporal and spatial connections experienced by the characters. This disruption leads fragmentation of cultural, geo-spatial and ecological identity, exemplified through Felanee's perpetual struggle to shelter an enduring connection with her past despite the throes of all her traumatising experiences.

CONCLUSION

In both *The Story of Felanee* and *The Black Hill*, the landscapes serve as active characters through which the integration of environmental history and human history takes place. Dai and Kalita exemplify the use of eco-narratives in literature to construct new narratives that function as counterhegemonic tools against dominant narratives which promote and justify strands of oppressions, exploitations and injustices.

In conclusion, this research provides a deeper comprehension of the web of interconnected ecological, geographical and cultural identities in Northeast India. Both Dai and Kalita's narratives underscore the repercussions of social, political and environmental atrocities on both people and the land. This lens also brings to light the significance of stories and modes of narrations in explicating trauma and engendering healing and survival of the environment and human beings. As Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (1992), "Recovery from trauma is a process of re-narration, a journey that unfolds over time" (175).

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