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Gendered Trauma and Counter-Histories of Violence in Northeast India in Aruni Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*

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Abstract

The socio-political fabric of Northeast India, particularly Assam has been indelibly marked by successive histories of conflict that continue to reverberate through its cultural imagination and literary production. One of the earliest fissures in this layered history emerged with the Sino-Indian War, which brought the realities of war directly into civilian life. In towns such as Tezpur, the anticipation of invasion unfolded as streets were emptied and everyday life was abruptly suspended. This latent instability intensified in the decades that followed, culminating in the upheaval of the Assam Movement which reconstituted notions of identity and belonging enforcing exclusionary binaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' that continue to shape the socio-political discourse of the region today. Concurrently, the emergence of insurgent formations such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) inaugurated a new and more sustained phase of militarised conflict. It further complicated the already volatile landscape. Violence, in this context, ceased to be episodic, and instead assumed a more chronic and almost an ambient presence. These conflicts did not just remain sequestered within the battlefields, rather they diffused insidiously into the minutiae of quotidian existence. Official narratives often privilege political events, military strategies or nationalist frameworks and they frequently exclude the intimate and gendered granular realities of violence. Women's experiences such as sexual violence, coercion and enforced silence were systematically relegated to the margins of official discourse producing what may be understood as an epistemic lacuna within state narratives. This paper seeks to examine how in times of trauma, memories carried by women refuse containment within the private sphere, instead it circulates across communities while trying to shape the collective understanding of violence beyond the limits of official documentation. The poetic collection *There Is No Good Time for Bad News* by Aruni Kashyap is not merely a literary representation of gendered experience during that time in Northeast but it is

also an alternative site of remembering where personal narratives are preserved and transmitted.

Keywords: Women, Trauma, Memory, History, Violence.

DISCUSSION

The 2004 protest by Manipuri women in the aftermath of the killing of Thanjam Manorama stands as one of the most searing indictments of militarised violence and the erasure of gendered suffering in contemporary India. Emerging from a context shaped by the enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), the incident exposes how structures of state power not only regulate territory but also silence the lived realities of those most vulnerable within it. The alleged abduction, sexual assault and killing of Manorama by security forces revealed a systemic proviso in which women's bodies become sites upon which authority is claimed and contested. The extraordinary act of protest that followed, where a group of Manipuri women stood naked before a military base holding a banner that read "Indian Army Rape Us" must be understood as an expression of acute desperation. This was not merely a political demonstration but a profound rearticulation of the very conditions of visibility. It is evident that women's voices are persistently excluded from official narratives and hence they use their bodies as the last available medium to demand recognition. In the absence of listening, they created a moment that could not be unheard. This "naked protest" inverted the logic of shame. Rather than internalising it, the women externalised it, directing it toward the very structures that had ceded them vulnerable.

Official accounts of conflict leave little room for marginalised and gendered suffering. As Ranjit Guha argues that, "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism-colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism" (Guha 37). Guha identifies two dominant epistemic formations –

the former privileges the perspective of colonial administrators, representing Indian history through the lens of governance, order and imperial control, and the latter, though ostensibly oppositional reproduces a similar hierarchical logic by centering nationalist leaders, political elites and institutional narratives. In both cases, history is articulated through what may be termed as a hegemonic discourse wherein the agency of the masses like the peasants, women, labourers and other subaltern groups are systematically effaced and relegated to the peripheral seat. The subaltern in this framework is not merely absent but is actively discursively silenced as their presence is fragmented into anecdotal traces and not acknowledged as constitutive of historical processes. History, therefore, becomes a monologic narrative that subsequently suppress the polyphonic lived realities, holding them as trifling and incidental according to their discretion.

The mainland metropolitan India often imagines itself as the locus and quietly positions its urban centres as the arbiters of what constitutes the "national" mainstream. This self-fashioning as an elite core produces a subtle hierarchy where its languages, concerns and aesthetics are normalised as universal, while those from the margins are marked as extraterrestrial. Such a worldview is not always overtly declared yet it operates through everyday assumptions like what is amplified, what is dismissed and what is left unspoken. In this configuration, the metropolitan gaze assigns value and legitimacy unevenly across regions. The Northeast, in particular, is often perceived through this distant and condescending lens, as though it exists outside the temporal and cultural rhythm of the so-called "mainland." This implicit elitism uses

geography to create hierarchy where the metropolitan centre emerges not just as a physical space but as an epistemic authority that determines which stories are worthy of circulation and which are consigned to silence.

Within this already marginalised space, women experience a further layer of invisibility. They are doubly expunged, firstly as subjects from a region that is structurally sidelined, and secondly as for being a woman. Their stories of survival, loss and resistance are frequently muted, either subsumed under generalised accounts of conflict or omitted altogether. This dual marginalisation renders them spectral figures within historiography. The trauma that is endured by women does not easily enter the archive; it exists instead in fragmented memories, oral testimonies and acts of resistance that challenge the boundaries of what is considered “historical”.

The Sino-Indian War was a brief but deeply consequential conflict fought between India and China in October–November 1962. The repercussions of the war in Northeast India were not confined to the domain of military history, rather it became deeply inscribed within the region’s psychological, cultural and political consciousness. In Assam, particularly in frontier towns such as Tezpur, the abrupt withdrawal of administrative authority generated a condition approaching civic disintegration. The poem, “The Chinese, Who Came Much Later” begins by depicting scenes of chaos and panic along the riverbank including stories of money being burned in the Tezpur bank and people desperately trying to flee. At that time, evacuation orders alongside the deliberate destruction of currency reserves and state records produced an atmosphere of abandonment. The war welcomed an intensified regime of militarisation that would come to define the spatial and emotional landscape of the Northeast. Civilian life was reconstituted under the shadow of surveillance and anxiety. Homes, schools and marketplaces were no longer insulated, instead they became

permeable zones where fear circulated as an everyday effect. The cowherds acting as custodians of oral tradition did not translate the violence enacted upon women into song. As the poem notes,

“the cowherds didn’t sing about the
behinds of the women who bathed in the
river.

They sang about the Chinese, who came
much later.” (Lines 5-6)

This deliberate narrative displacement signals an early erasure where the everyday vulnerability of women’s bodies is deemed unworthy of articulation. They perform a selective memorialisation. As the crisis deepens, their silence towards women’s exposure to scrutiny and bodily threat calcifies. Women’s narratives of violation and suffering are rendered inconsequential. Aruni Kashyap reflects in the poem, “No one would hear me if I screamed” that “who would take away everything that I had, / though I knew it wouldn’t be the ornaments / or the money only” (Lines 36-38). Their bodies become sites to enact violence and become extensions of territory that is meant to be invaded and intruded, yet their testimonies are denied legitimacy within official frameworks. And in the wake of this, their memories persist in fragments, in silences, in whispered recollections and in the uneasy afterlives of trauma.

The poem “Alpha Ursae Minoris” gestures a stark asymmetry in the affair of remembrance. It is plain to see that women’s contributions are always dissolved into the background of history. The lines, “these people who made sweaters for us, women / who took off their ornaments for war funds” (Lines 25-26), prompts recollection of tactile and intimate acts of care. Throughout the ages, men are memorialised through the visible logic of combat. Their bodies are positioned at the frontlines where their actions are inscribed as valorous deeds done for the nation, on the other

hand, women's labour operates within a muted register of invisibility. The hand-knitted sweater made for their son to travel to the battlefield and their cherished ornaments and the valuable heirlooms that they are divested of are transmuted into instruments and funds for war. Yet these gestures are neither monumentalised nor archived. Women's contributions are often eclipsed by the spectacle of masculine heroism.

The poem "Fake Boots" offers a deeply unsettling portrayal of life under militarised conditions where the figure of the "protector" becomes indistinguishable from that of the violator. It is set within the climate shaped by the presence of forces responding to groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) where women were the most vulnerable. Aruni Kashyap in the poem writes that,

We found her lying under the bed, a
machete clutched in her hands, drawn
with love towards her breast, as if to fight
the whole world of alien Hindi words,
stamping feet and a camp of green-men
near the river where women no longer
bathed, after many women were stripped.
(Lines 1-6)

The image of the woman hiding from the men dressed in green, beneath the bed, clutching a machete, suggests a terrifying foreknowledge: she is not merely afraid, but already aware of the violence that awaits her. In this fraught landscape, where insurgent groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom are officially designated as threats by the state, the poem reveals that those entrusted with protection often become the very agents of terror. The reference to the "camp of green-men" (Line 5) marks the presence of the military that has made ordinary spaces uninhabitable. The river which was once a communal site used by both genders and every entity of the society, is now abandoned as "women no longer / bathed, after many women were stripped" (Line 5-6). The poem clearly exposes the duplicity of

power. The military figure which is an agent of order and security emerges as a bearer of unchecked violence that operates under the silent sanction of institutional impunity. The line "she would be one of them now / who were peeled to be enjoyed by many" (Lines 8-9) transforms the female body into an object of exposure and consumption implying not a singular act of abuse but a recurring pattern in which women are repeatedly stripped, violated and circulated. Subsequently, the women withdraw to silence and talk to walls and insects such as cicadas. Speech is displaced onto the inanimate or non-human listeners signaling that the social world has become inhospitable to her voice. This displacement reveals a world in which language has lost the way to its social destination as there is no longer a listener wanting to hear her or capable of receiving her truth. In a way, it can be said that she is not silent by absence but silenced by the absence of a viable audience.

Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* asserts that "trauma is disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence...the study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing" (LaCapra 41). Trauma does not merely wound a person, it actually fractures the coherence of the self, producing gaps, absences and ruptures within memory and identity. The individual is no longer able to inhabit a continuous sense of being and instead exists amidst disjunctions finding it difficult to integrate feelings into the narrative form. Trauma exceeds the limits of linear narration. The magnitude of women's trauma in conditions of conflict is so unfathomable that it cannot be accurately articulated or penned down in the formal structures of history. Dori Laub's gives a strong statement that the Holocaust is "an event without a witness". In such circumstances, the subject is deprived of an interlocutor as there is "no longer an other to which one could say 'Thou'" (Laub 80). This absence fractures the

self's ability to bear witness even to its own suffering producing what Laub calls as a crisis of self-witnessing. The individual overwhelmed by the incomprehensibility of the event may internalise the guilt and misrecognise themselves as complicit in the violence they endured or observed. Consequently, the traumatic event remains unclaimed and thus spends suspended outside coherent memory. Cathy Caruth also emphasises that traumatic events evade immediate comprehension as she writes that,

For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (Caruth 18)

Such experiences are not assimilated into consciousness in the moment of their happening, they return belatedly in fragments, in echoes, in distortions and in repetitions. This temporal disjunction complicates the very notion of historical knowledge which traditionally depends upon clarity and coherence. In this way, the authority of historiography that seeks to stabilise and organise the past into legible narratives is challenged. The experiences that demand remembrance are the least amenable to representation and only exists in a state of partial visibility. They linger at the edges of language, surfacing in broken recollections, in gestures, in the quiet persistence of pain that refuses closure, as well as within oral narratives, in the cadences of storytelling, in poems, songs and other ephemeral forms.

The figure of the armed officer in green clothes in the poem "My Aunt Talks About Being Raped By Soldiers" embodies a chilling paradox. The military officer arrives under the authority of protection and exercises the very authority through sustained sexual exploitation. In the poem the woman is forced into a situation

where her survival and the safety of her daughter depend on obeying a military officer;

But this man in green clothes
who had come with a gun
asked me to do things to him
I had never done to my husband –
if I did, he would leave
my ten-year-old daughter alone. (Lines
64-69)

The man masquerading power creates a prolonged condition of captivity where the woman's body is systematically appropriated. At the end of the poem the gesture of slipping money between her breasts reduces her to an object of transaction. As though, women's chastity, dignity and personhood can be purchased. However, she incinerates the commodification of her body by burning away the "green notes". Later, she insists that her experience, however brutal must be seen and everything be written down "on your paper's front page / along with my picture" (Lines 93-94). In this demand, shame is displaced by an urgent desire for visibility as she no longer seeks concealment or protection from social judgment. Instead, she confronts it directly, willing to expose her own humiliation if it ensures that her experience is acknowledged and remembered.

The poem "There Is No Good Time for Bad News" explores another theme of suffering that is the condition of mothers who are compelled to inhabit an unending temporality of waiting. Once their sons are drawn into insurgent groups in the name of saving the nation and bringing in revolution, it is the mothers who has to inherit and endure the aftermath of grief, uncertainty and loss. These mothers have to endlessly wait for their sons their whole life as if they are condemned to an interminable vigil, hovering between fragile line of hope and impending loss. The poetic persona says that,

This is the thirty-second time she
has come to identify a body. This time,

I am sure it belongs to her son. (Lines 1-3)

The mother has to go through the ordeal of identifying bodies repeatedly, returning again and again until she is finally confronted with the one that belongs to her son. Kashyap describes that as she arrives, women from the village are instructed to surround her closely, supporting and containing her as she approaches. This is not her first experience of such identification because she has endured it many times before. Those around her are expected to restrain and manage her reaction, holding her firmly to prevent her from running or harming herself. The mother appears almost like a lunatic in her grief, like someone breaking free from an asylum. On realising that the body is not her son's, a brief sense of relief passes through her, yet it is immediately shadowed by the knowledge that she must endure the same cycle of anguish all over again. After a few days or weeks or months, she has to run onto the burning tar road again, crying out "Baba, Baba," with her clothes dragging behind her like an unraveling shadow. The heat of the ground will blister her feet and the pain from it will cling to her like a stigma that would not fade. But what follows is not only relief but a lingering weight and an enduring burden that has to be carried day after day because the body she mourned was again not her son's. However, in "The Militant's Mother: A Letter" the mother pleads that if her son would return for even once, his presence would make her forget all that has been endured, the pain, the suffering and the quiet burden of shame and humiliation that his joining the United Liberation Front of Asom has brought upon them. Such emotions floating between waiting and identification, and quietly negotiating between love and loss remain largely obscured from official archives. The state documents insurgency through reports, operations and outcomes but they tend to leave the lived aftermath borne within domestic spaces. This absence reveals the limitations of official historiography which often fails to accommodate forms of suffering that are

affective and deeply personal. Lastly in the poem "Dear India: A Collage Poem", Aruni Kashyap turns toward the nation with a quiet insistence urging it not to forget the sweaters knitted by the women in Assam and also not to forget the ornaments they had given away. These gestures, though small and domestic in appearance carry the weight of sacrifice and care, and they stand as reminders that participation in moments of crisis is not limited to the battlefield. He again writes that,

and do not forget
that James Bond has killed 150 men and
has slept with 44 women since
the first movie came out in 1962. That is
also an important matter. (Lines 7-11)

Aruni Kashyap invokes the figure of the iconic fictional spy James Bond whose long record of killings is exalted as a spectacle of masculine prowess and bravado. Though narratives of masculine heroism are magnified and dramatised, Kashyap insists that the experiences of women must not be consigned to oblivion. He is not dismissing heroism but is only questioning its hierarchy as remembrance must expand to include both the glorified acts of men and the unacknowledged tales of women.

Michel Foucault's idea of literature as a form of "counter-memory" repositions it as a space where suppressed and marginalised histories find expression. In the text, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, he writes that, "literature has been transformed, since the nineteenth century, into a counter-memory; and the subjects that naturally evolve from this language manifest the history of our otherness" (Foucault 8). Foucault believes that literature moves away from merely reflecting dominant narratives and instead begins to articulate what official discourse excludes. In this transformed role, it becomes a site where the history of "otherness" emerges, bringing into experiences such as "violence, transgression, madness, sexuality, death and finitude" (Foucault 8) into light. Conventional historiography often try to

regulate or omit these dimensions, therefore, Foucault contends that literature does not simply recount events, it disrupts established modes of knowing by giving form to what resists formal documentation. Hence, as Foucault terms it in *Society Must be Defended*, the “subjugated knowledges are, then, blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship (Foucault 7). These subjugated knowledges are not absent histories but are masked and embedded within institutional and discursive structures. In this sense, literary texts function as alternative archives, preserving traces of lives and sufferings that would otherwise remain uncatalogued.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has sought to highlight the ways in which histories of violence in Northeast India remain profoundly incomplete when viewed solely through the lens of official archives. A sustained tension emerges between what is recorded and what is lived, and between the sanctioned narrative and the submerged experience. The affective, marginalised and gendered dimensions of conflict particularly those borne by women, persist in forms that evade formal documentation existing only within memory, silence and alternative modes of expression. They fail to assimilate women’s experiences into linear historiography. In this context, poetry assumes a critical function as a site of “counter-memory”. It recovers what has been systematically erased and reactivates the submerged forms of knowledge. It also brings the lives of those who have been displaced to the peripheries of historical narration into perceptibility. Through its evocation of waiting mothers, violated bodies, and the quiet unacknowledged labours of women, it unsettles the dominant structures of remembrance that elevate masculine heroism while relegating

women’s suffering and contributions to obscurity. In essence, this study calls for a rethinking of history itself. It should not be a closed authoritative record but a contested and incomplete field that must remain attentive to its own silences. To write such a history is to recognise that the most enduring truths of violence reside in the fragile and persistent traces carried within memory, literature and the lived experiences of those who have long remained unheard.

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