



# **Trauma, Identity, And Memory: A Study Through Mamang Dai's The Legends Of Pensam And Easterine Kire's A Terrible Matriarchy.**

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## Abstract

This paper examines how identity, trauma, and memory intersect in the literature of Northeast India, focusing on the select works of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire. Drawing on identity, trauma and memory studies, the analysis highlights the ways in which individual and collective subjectivities are negotiated within contexts of historical marginalization, ethnic conflict, gender oppression, and displacement. The study explores how *The Legends of Pensam* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* portray fractured identities shaped by trauma and sustained through acts of memory. While Dai's myths preserve cultural memory, Kire's narratives recover women's silenced voices, Kire emphasizes on personal recollection. The paper delineates how the select writers use memory to negotiate trauma and reconstruct identity in their narratives.

Northeast Indian Literature; Identity, Trauma Studies, Memory and Narrative

## Introduction

Northeast Indian literature has emerged as one of the most dynamic and significant bodies of writing in contemporary Indian English literature. Rich in cultural plurality, oral traditions, and complex histories of conflict, displacement, and marginalization, this literature reflects a unique negotiation of selfhood and belonging. Unlike mainstream Indian writing in English, the narratives of the Northeast explore identity not merely as an individual marker but as a deeply entangled cultural and political structure shaped by colonial histories, ethnic conflicts, and gendered experiences of oppression. Writers such as Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire foreground these dynamics in their works, exploring how trauma and memory construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct individual and collective identities.

The concept of Identity explores how selfhood is constructed in relation to cultural, social, and political forces (Hall, 1996). Trauma studies, particularly through scholars like Cathy Caruth (1996) and Dominick LaCapra (2001), emphasize the ways in which traumatic events disrupt linear histories and produce fragmented subjectivities. Meanwhile, memory as articulated by thinkers like Pierre Nora (1989) and Paul

Ricoeur (2004), highlights how the act of remembering functions as a cultural and political practice in shaping narratives of belonging.

Identity is a process rather than a fixed essence. Erik Erikson (1968), in his seminal work *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, emphasized Identity as a psychosocial construct negotiated through experiences of continuity and rupture. Later, postcolonial theorists such as Stuart Hall (1996) advanced the notion of cultural identity as “a matter of becoming as well as of being,” highlighting its constant formation through history, culture, and power relations.

In the context of Northeast Indian literature, Identity must be read as plural, fractured, and contested. The region is marked by ethnic diversity and histories of colonization and state violence, leading to identity crises. For instance, Hall’s claim that identity is always a “production” rather than an “accomplished fact” (Hall, 1996, p. 4) resonates strongly with the narratives from the Northeast, where writers grapple with questions of cultural survival, hybridity, and belonging. Thus, the concept of Identity allows us to read Northeast Indian texts as articulations of fragmented selfhood, where characters oscillate between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, belonging and exile.

Cathy Caruth (1996) defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that escapes full comprehension at the moment of its occurrence, returning later in flashbacks, repetitions, or disruptions in narrative. Dominick LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” trauma—while the former repeats traumatic experiences compulsively, the latter enables survivors to engage with trauma critically, moving toward healing.

Trauma in Northeast Indian literature often emerges from structural violence—ethnic conflicts, insurgencies, militarization, and gender oppression. At the same time, trauma is also deeply personal: the death of loved ones, loss of home, or the silencing of women’s voices. For instance, Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* portrays communal traumas carried forward through oral narratives and myths, while Kire’s *A Terrible Matriarchy* depicts the trauma of patriarchal imposition on women in a society transitioning away from matriliney.

Importantly, these remind us that trauma is not just about individual suffering but also about collective memory and cultural transmission. Pierre Nora (1989), in his influential concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), argues that memory is preserved not in static repositories but through cultural practices, symbols, and narratives. In regions like the Northeast, where histories of violence are often silenced or marginalized in national discourse, literature becomes a key site for articulating trauma that resists erasure. Memory is a means of reclaiming histories that have been silenced or distorted.

Oral traditions, myths, and folk narratives—central in Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam*—become active forms of remembering that contest official histories.

Memory also intersects with trauma: as LaCapra (2001) notes, the act of remembering can either retraumatize (when one is stuck in compulsive repetition) or heal (when one works through). In the literature of the Northeast, memory often functions as both—a haunting reminder of loss and a way to preserve cultural identity in the face of erasure. Paul Ricoeur (2004) distinguishes between “memory” and “history,” suggesting that memory is always selective and interpretative, shaped by present concerns.

Mamang Dai, one of the foremost voices from Arunachal Pradesh, places oral traditions and myth at the centres of her narrative in *The Legends of Pensam*. The novel is structured as a collection of interconnected stories that merge myth, memory, and lived history, foregrounding the complex interplay between collective identity and individual experience. This shows how cultural identity is produced through storytelling. As Hall (1996) also suggests, Identity is never static but constantly reshaped through cultural narratives and historical contingencies. In *The Legends of Pensam*, myths serve as a medium of memory transmitting communal values and histories that have otherwise been erased from mainstream discourse. For instance, the stories of the spirits, shamans, and ancestral encounters reflect what Nora (1989) calls *lieux de mémoire*—sites of cultural memory that allow communities to situate themselves within the continuum of history. These myths, while fictionalized, serve as repositories of collective trauma, recalling violence, displacement, and loss.

Trauma in Dai's narrative is less about individual psychological suffering and more about cultural trauma—the shared experience of marginalization and erasure of tribal histories in the dominant discourse. Cathy Caruth's (1996) rightly observes that trauma resists direct representation but manifests in fragments resonates with Dai's narrative structure. The fragmented episodes, shifting narrators, and spectral voices of ancestors reproduce the very nature of traumatic memory, which cannot be contained in linear storytelling.

Ultimately, Dai's work concentrates on how memory and myth function as survival strategies for communities negotiating the trauma of cultural loss. Identity here is produced not as fixed but as a continuum, always mediated by memory and stories of the past.

Easterine Kire, a pioneering writer from Nagaland, interrogates gender, tradition, and cultural change in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The novel explores the patriarchal structures imposed upon a society that was once matrilineal, charting the traumatic consequences for women across generations.

The novel reflects Butler's (1990) view that gender identity is socially constructed through norms and practices rather than biologically determined. Kire portrays how the protagonist, Dielieno, negotiates her selfhood in a society where patriarchal structures increasingly dominate cultural life. Her identity is formed in resistance, shaped by the traumas inflicted on women by systemic silencing.

Trauma studies offer another lens: Dielieno's narrative is punctuated by gendered trauma—the denial of education, domestic violence, and social ostracism. As LaCapra (2001) argues, trauma may result in “acting out” or “working through.” In the case of Kire's novel, memory plays a crucial role in working through trauma. The act of recalling women's experiences across generations functions as a form of resistance, ensuring that the silenced voices of women are not erased from collective memory.

Moreover, Kire uses memory to document social transformation. The memory of matriliney functions as a counter-narrative to patriarchal dominance, offering an alternative cultural memory that destabilizes contemporary power relations. Nora (1989) asserts that memory is a site of struggle becomes evident as Kire juxtaposes the cultural memory of matriliney with the lived reality of patriarchy.

Thus, *A Terrible Matriarchy* reveals how trauma and memory shape women's identities in transitional societies. By placing women's experiences at the centres of her narrative, Kire creates a literary space where silenced traumas become visible and memory becomes an act of reclaiming agency. Identity here is also gendered: as Judith Butler (1990) suggests, identity categories are not innate but socially constructed through performativity. This becomes significant when analyzing gendered oppression in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*.

Trauma in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is subtle yet pervasive, manifesting in the form of psychic dislocation and existential angst. The trauma is not always catastrophic but emerges in the form of what LaCapra (2001) terms “structural trauma”—the alienation produced by systemic inequalities and cultural marginalization. For instance, the sense of disconnection experienced by urban youth reflects the trauma of living in a fragmented society where belonging is tenuous.

Memory in Kire's work is deeply personal and interiorized. Memory serves as a narrative tool through which characters seek coherence in fragmented realities. This aligns with Ricoeur's (2004) claim that memory is selective and interpretive, not a faithful reproduction of the past.

Kire's novel thus highlights how trauma and memory intersect in Northeast India, producing fractured subjectivities and unstable identities. In both novels, memory functions as a therapeutic tool. Memory becomes a means of survival, allowing characters to reconstitute their identities in the face of loss and dislocation. Kire's works thus demonstrate how trauma and memory intersect in the personal sphere, shaping women's identities in both domestic and diasporic contexts. Taken together, the works of Dai and Kire illustrate how identity, trauma, and memory are deeply intertwined in Northeast Indian literature. Dai emphasizes communal memory and cultural trauma; Kire foregrounds gendered trauma and intergenerational memory. Whether through myths, oral traditions, or personal recollections, memory becomes a means of resisting erasure, negotiating trauma, and reconstituting identity.

These texts offer a counter-discourse to mainstream narratives of Indian literature. They assert that identity in the Northeast is not singular but fractured, shaped by histories of marginalization, gendered oppression, and displacement.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the literature of the Northeast—through the works of Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire foregrounds the interconnections of trauma, identity, and memory. Identity shapes the selfhood which is negotiated in relation to cultural and gendered structures. Trauma highlights the impact of violence, alienation, and loss in shaping fractured subjectivities. Memory underscores how remembering becomes an active, political process of survival and resistance. Ultimately, the select writers demonstrate that literature from the Northeast is not merely regional but contributes significantly to discourses on trauma, memory, and identity. Their works reveal that trauma is not only about wounds but also about resilience, and that memory is not only about the past but also about shaping the future.

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