

Research paper

Widows in the Weave of Folklore: Postmemory and Resilience in Northeast Indian Narrative

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ABSTRACT

The Northeast region is home to multiple tribes like the Adis and the Nagas, where widows remain stagnant figures within the dynamic folkloric paradigm subject to these tribal communities. Memory, which serves as a tool for bridging the present and the past, preserves the oral tradition through the intergenerational reiteration of folklore. Marianne Hirsch's (1996) concept of Postmemory enables a nuanced exploration of the relationship between personal and collective memory within the literary domain. Similarly, Ellis & Bochner (2000) describes Autoethnography as a method that employs personal narratives to examine cultural and historical experiences in literature. The confluence of these theories could be extended in the folkloric works of Mamang Dai in *The Legend of Pensam* (2006) and Temsula Ao in *These Hills Called Home* (2006), which delineate a realistic portrayal of widows by intricately weaving the narratives of their hardship and resilience. This study examines the position of widows in folklore through the short stories 'Pinyar, the Widow' and 'The Last Song,' focusing on the marginalised characters Pinyar and Libeni, who endure the travesties of being a widowed mother within the folkloric paradigm.

Keywords: widows, postmemory, autoethnography, identity, folklore

Northeast India has long endured the cumulative effects of colonial and postcolonial interventions, where historical militarisation, insurgencies, and ethnic conflicts have disrupted communities and perpetuated socio-political marginalisation. According to the current data presented by Hazarika (2025) it mentions:

The region previously known for its insurgency and ethnic violence. The region has seen continuous conflict for decades, impacting both men, women and children's. Data published by different agencies indicate that while over 60% of people affected by conflict and violence are women and children. The absence of women in peace negotiations means the issues they face such as gender-based violence, economic disparity, and social discrimination remain unaddressed. (pp. 51-52)

This induced unrest in the Northeast region of India has largely been a product of encounters and interactions with both imperial and the post-colonial scenarios. 'The British rule completely altered the power equation..., yet historically, the foundation of their existence has been systematically negated, deprived of, and dispossessed' (Kapai, 2020, p. 156). This intervention magnified the existing ethnic hostilities, creating enduring fault lines that continue to shape contemporary inter-tribal relations. The 'rich culture and heritage was systematically destroyed by British and these talented artisans and other Naga people (...) Naga lost the main essence of its indigenous textile culture, the main pillar of its ethnic identity and pride' (Ghonkrokta, 2020, p. 3). Thus, the colonial disruption of indigenous systems not only reconfigured the socio-political map of the region but also engendered continuities of violence and marginalisation inflicted within the region where "heightened vulnerability of women and children

in conflict-induced displacement” (Koul & Despande, 2026, p. 1). This fragmentation is visible in Nagaland and Manipur due to which the conditions of people rendered them traumatic and led to systematic erasure of families. As Pukhrambam Priyabala (2015) mentions:

The ongoing conflict in Manipur has left many women as widow and children as orphan. For instance, for every married man killed in the conflict, there emerges a widow and most of them have to take the responsibility of supporting the family through available means. The families of these victims are not only denied justice but are also deprived of the benefits of many government schemes specially designed for the victims of armed conflict.

The unceasing tensions in the region have caused years of human loss and suffering leaving the families in desolation. This further creates a large population of survivors especially widows, whose narratives embody both the trauma of loss and the resilience of survival. Women within these tribal communities especially Adi tribe of Manipur and the Nagas from Nagaland, occupy a crucial socio-cultural position; they often become the epitome of domesticity, symbolising both endurance and the sombreness embedded in the collective memory of the region. As Watimongla Pongener (2017) mentions Temsula Ao’s account on this gendered disparity:

Women on account of their gender are excluded from centres of power, a situation common to most of the Naga tribes. In Ao Naga society, she observes, the process of exclusion begins with lineage which is always traced to the male. The names given to females belong to the clan and not the woman. (p. 26)

The coercion of patriarchal norms of widowhood and perpetuation of ostracising rituals delineated a biased portrayal of their roles and identities, restricting their agency and silencing their experiences. One of the prominent writer of the region, Easterine Iralu asserts, ‘we have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience; I have been marginalised simply because I am a Naga, twice-marginalised because I am a woman and thrice-marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community’ (Misra, 2011, p. 273). Iralu’s observation reflects upon the systematic social marginalisation of widows in the tribal regions, delineating how ethnicity, gender, and tribal identity coalesces to shape experiences of exclusion. This not only silences women’s voices but also erases their historical and cultural contributions, necessitating literary interventions that recover and preserve the ‘silenced female voices are reinscribed into history through acts of literary interpretation’ (Farhan, 2025, p. 87). Similarly, ‘Northeast women writers have been voicing and questioning the silence and shame attached to gendered violence through their writings’ (Elizabeth, 2021, p. 27).

Writers from the Northeast region, like Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao, use reflexivity in their works to evoke the lost voices using folkloric traditions and storytelling to navigate the complex socio-cultural landscapes of the Northeast and provide an alternate narrative that highlights their experiences that challenge mainstream erasure. In the context of tribal widows, Marianne Hirsch’s (1997) concept of *postmemory*, incepted due to the events of ‘Holocaust, mediated by the father-survivor but determinative for the son. He uses his father’s oral testimony and the few personal artefacts that have endured—photographs, documents, the few remaining records of a culture almost completely annihilated’ (p. 13), this enables a nuanced understanding of how collective trauma and cultural loss are transmitted across generations through silence, narrative, and embodied memory. This framework could be extended to study the patriarchal confinement of widows within the tribes of the Northeast who still endure the trauma incurred due to the amalgamation of colonial and postcolonial vicissitudes that continue to haunt the social fabric of their existence. As Hirsch defines postmemory as an experience of memory ‘not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation’ (1997, p. 122), which aptly describes how the descendants of these widows internalise unspoken histories. Similarly, curation of narratives around widows by these authors reflects the recursive nature of suffering that subverts linear temporality. The ethical dimension of such remembrance aligns with Hirsch’s assertion that memory functions as an act of moral justice, resisting erasure and political silencing. Thus, through the lens of postmemory, tribal widows emerge not merely as victims of violence but as figures of collective remembrance, whose trauma gets transmitted intergenerationally and persists within subsequent generations.

Due to the dearth of literature in the English language, scholarly intervention, and lack of media attention, there has been an intentional oversight into the issues surrounding widows and the injustices they face within the broader patriarchal construct. The present study somehow aims to trace the diverse yet intersecting experiences of widowhood that collectively articulate the ‘ethics of memory’ (Margalit, 2002) and resilience through the narratives of Mamang Dai’s ‘Pinyar, the widow’ and Temsula Ao’s ‘The Last Song’. This study addresses this gap by examining how widows become central figures in preserving, performing, and transforming cultural memory through folklore, thereby exposing the injustices faced by a marginalised community and calling for an ethical remembrance of these issues across generations. Through their writings, these authors not only offer a veristic portrayal of their cultural landscape, but also resist dominant, monotonous representations of widowhood. By positioning widows as carriers of postmemory, these narratives show how they embody and transmit intergenerational trauma, functioning as stagnant figures within the dynamic corpus of folklore studies. In doing so, this study analyses how women’s subjective experiences are shaped by the region’s troubled historical and socio-cultural context. Furthermore, the patriarchal subordination of widows within these folklores and the added

nuances of motherhood endured by widows in the context of these tribal societies represent an understudied dimension. Their experiences reveal how intergenerational trauma incurred due to the colonial and militaristic disruptions, patriarchal marginalisation, and cultural memory are transmitted and reinterpreted.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND POSTMEMORY: TRACING FOLKLORIC TRANSMISSION

A tribal community is built upon the memories of narratives, stories, and experiences that are ingrained in the collective psyche of its people, providing them a sense of identity and inclusion within the community. These narratives and experiences are passed down to the next generation, preserving the nuances of such belonging. As Hirsch posits, 'it characterises the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation (. . .)' (1996, p. 660). However, when traumatic events infiltrate the memories, they alter the transmitted narratives and imbue their aftermaths to successive generations, postulated as Postmemory, which warrants a nuanced exploration of the relationship between personal and collective memory. de Almeida & Wimplinger explain, when direct experience is no longer accessible, postmemory relies on oral histories and 'different material and medial sources such as texts, photographs, or memory objects' (2022, p. 294). These sources, when spoken, written, performed, or even silent, demand narrativisation (De Loof et al., 2022). The act of storytelling thus becomes a bridge between inherited memory and self-reflection, forming the basis of an '*autoethnographic experience*' where personal and collective identities coalesce. Ellis et al. merge autobiography and ethnography to make 'personal experience meaningful' (2011, p. 277). Owing to this, writers use their reflexive accounts and such intergenerational transmissions of narratives to reimagine, reinterpret, and reclaim folklore. Along this grain, Mamang Dai & Temsula Ao's works associate autoethnography with postmemory, where both the writers reimagine oral traditions through lived experience, transforming cultural memory into literary testimony that reclaims marginalised voices of widows and centres cultural identity.

In *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), Mamang Dai adopts an autoethnographic mode where oral memories, local histories, and her own lived experiences converge. As Dai herself acknowledges, 'I think not, and that is why, in these stories, I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged' (2006, p. xi). Through this self-reflexive statement, Dai positions herself as both participant and chronicler, transforming neglected communal histories into acts of literary remembrance. She blends her personal ordeals, brimming with regional memories, and transcends them into fictional stories. According to Samrita Sinha, Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) 'is an autoethnographic attempt at narrativising the oral legends, folktales, myths and rituals of Adi tribal culture' (Sinha, 2020, p. 3). Similarly, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* (2006) intertwines postmemory with moral responsibility of providing ethical remembering to these widows and their histories. Her stories are rooted in the Naga insurgency that translates inherited trauma into narrative agency. As Ao reminds us, 'The inheritors of such a history have a tremendous responsibility to sift through the collective experience and make sense of the impact left by the struggle on their lives' (2006, p. x). Her reflection upon the lived realities of the people mirrors postmemory curated for later generations who inherit the trauma that they did not directly experience. Ao's works are infused with the memory of the afflicted Naga homeland, capturing personal grief and inherited trauma: 'These were, however, troubled times for the Nagas' (2006, p. 25). Thus, the intergenerational transmission of memory through folklore in Northeastern writing not only preserves culture but also becomes a mode of witnessing and reclaiming identity through the intersection of autoethnography and postmemory (Deiri & Burkhard, 2025). This dynamic is visible in Temsula Ao's 'The Last Song,' where an old narrator recalls a girl's (Apenyo's) death during wartime: 'the old woman starts talking and tells them that on certain nights a peculiar wind blows through the village, which seems to start from the region of the graveyard and which sounds like a hymn' (2006, p. 32). This spectral imagery transforms loss into collective remembrance, as the 'wind' itself becomes a mnemonic presence in the narrative that embodies what Hirsch calls the transmission of trauma, mediated through such narratives. Similarly, in Mamang Dai's 'Pinyar, the Widow,' the story recalls:

Once upon a time, there lived a race of supernatural beings called the Miti-mili (. . .) Before the Miti-mili race disappeared, deranged by strange visions, they gave this sacred powder to mankind, and a strong belief grew that si-ye had special powers (. . .) Only women were allowed to handle it, and Pinyar herself made the best si-ye cakes.' (2006, p. 29)

Here, Dai presents folklore as cultural testimony, foregrounding women as bearers and preservers of such sacred knowledge. The ethnographic weaving of her prose allows her personal memory, labour, and myth to become not merely a repository of legend but a living archive of women's memory which becomes an embodied form of postmemory. Echoing Annie Ernaux's (2025) view that writing translates private memory into a shared historical text, these narratives reconstruct individual pain into a social archive of memory. As noted in the '*Memory as Political Landscape*' section of the *Polyglottist Language Academy* (2025) blog:

Ernaux's writing teaches us that memory is not simply a psychological function. It is a political act. To remember—and to write those memories publicly—is to reclaim power over one's own narrative. In a world where dominant histories often erase marginalized voices, her insistence on the validity of her own and others' recollections is deeply radical. Memory, in Ernaux's work, is resistance.

In an interview with Mamang Dai about her creative process and cultural influences, Jaydeep Sarangi asks about her characters Gimur and Nenem from different stories in *The Legends of Pensam*, to which Dai responds that they are ‘women of the tribe who protect family and clan... who can also break tradition and are ready to pay the price; women have always been doing this at different times throughout history’ (2017, p. 5), situating her fiction as an act of representation and cultural preservation rather than ideological bias. Further, Dai reflects on the imagined landscape of Arunachal Pradesh in *The Legends of Pensam*, which was initially conceived as placeless, but memory ‘seeps in without our knowing... until one day, maybe in some far-off place you hear rain, or see the slant of sunlight and suddenly memory stirs,’ (Sarangi, 2017, p. 6). This reveals her personal memory is infused with her creative writing. Similarly, Temsula Ao in an interview, distinguishes between writing based on ‘personal experience’ and that which stems from ‘personal knowledge’ of historical events, suggesting that her stories in *These Hills Called Home* emerge from a collective consciousness of trauma rather than autobiography (Longkumer, 2024). Thus, both Dai and Ao’s fiction transforms silenced grief into cultural remembrance, positioning them as mediators of memory where they become ‘moral witness[es]... that may well give voice to an ethical community that is endangered by an evil force’ (Margalit, 2002, p. 182). Read through a feminist hermeneutic lens, their works reinterpret tribal oral traditions and everyday women’s lives marred by violence and resilience of widows, in their tribal communities. ‘Against the grain’ (Parry, 2002) of dominant histories, turning storytelling itself into an act of resistance and reclamation (Türen & Kuru, 2023).

The widow’s narrative becomes subsumed within the dynamic paradigm of folkloric traditions and functions as a marker of cultural remembrance. These women adhere to strict customs and primitive practices transmitted through generations, intensifying their trauma and diminishing their individual identities. ‘Postmemory is thus performative, and what it performs can be healthy, in the sense of attaching us to the past, or unhealthy, ... unacceptably taking on, even reenacting a past that was never fully ours’ (Hirsch, 2012, pp. 2–3). In the narratives Libeni and Pinyar, both the widows are rendered voiceless, enclosed within the inherited memories and rituals that impede their emancipation. Their grief transcends the personal, merging with inherited memories of displacement and patriarchal domination, as the agency of transmission lies within the society itself, which perpetuates the widows’ stagnation within historically entrenched traditions. Hirsch defines postmemory as an experience of memory ‘not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation’ (1997, p. 22), aptly describing how descendants internalise such hidden histories and recreate narratives that align with Hirsch’s view that memory itself constitutes an ethical practice, which resists political erasure and silencing. The widows of these tribal regions thus emerge not merely as victims of violence but markers of collective remembrance, who endure inherited trauma while sustaining cultural preservation (Muciaccia & Macchia, 2025).

Another instance of autoethnography and postmemory can be located in the prologue of Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). In the stories, Dai connects the region with its past narratives so that the realistic essence and history of the land can be both retained and reclaimed. She narrates in the first person, describing her firsthand experience of the place and its people. In the story ‘Pinyar, the Widow,’ she and the editor of the glossy magazine, Mona, visit Pinyar while she is ‘grumbling and cursing while drying the clothes’ (Dai, 2006, p. 319), a moment that reflects her miserable state. Dai describes how Pinyar’s misfortunes arise from her alleged adultery and from society’s punitive moral codes, which she internalises as divine retribution for her ignorance of the *miti-mili* rituals and hunting practices. Through this narration, Dai reveals how the condition of widows in her community is deeply rooted in her own cultural consciousness, and how she seeks to give these women representation and vivid remembrance through Pinyar’s story. Likewise, in Temsula Ao’s ‘The Last Song,’ where she uses third-person narration through an elderly village woman who recounts the church-day massacre to the children, as described in the postscript:

It is a cold night in December, and in a remote village, an old storyteller is sitting by the hearth-fire with a group of students who have come home for the winter holidays. They love visiting her to listen to her stories, but tonight Granny is not her usual chirpy self; she looks much older and seems to be agitated over something (2006, p. 31).

In the assertions made by both Ao and Dai, folklore emerges as a distinctly feminine space that authenticates the old woman trope of the storyteller and embodies the vicarious transmission of trauma endured by widows. Both writers resurrect the lost and ignored narratives of their regions, describing an intrinsic association between people and folklore. Libeni and Pinyar recall how traditional stories and oral customs render them belonging, while simultaneously restricting them within society. For instance, Libeni is aware of the government’s intrusiveness and violence. She recognises the impending danger and attempts to protect her daughter. Her act becomes an exemplary for future generations to remember. Similarly, Pinyar, who is shaped by the folklore that inhabits her memory, blames herself for her suffering and never transgresses the social boundaries imposed upon her. This demonstrates the implications of postmemory weigh heavily upon marginalised women, particularly widows, whose inherited traumas and silences are perpetuated across generations (Ahmadi, 2021). As Hirsch notes, memory events become the vector of tragedies and suffering which impact later generations for a long time’ (O’Donoghue, 2018). Libeni’s brutal death and Pinyar’s merciless exile imbue their fate that makes them the victims of fossilisation

due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that deny them voice or agency. As Jansen observes, how women become the ‘storekeepers of memory—not because of their genetic structure or some other innate quality, but as the result of a lifelong, transgenerational training in caring for and nurturing others and a lifetime of unequal power status’ (2000, p. 35). Thus, the widow in these narratives acts as active agents of postmemory, even as traditional customs and gendered norms suppress them within an obdurate system of remembrance and repression. Their memories become cultural markers, constructing their stagnant identity within the tribal community across generations.

Mamang Dai’s representation of the Adi tribe and Arunachal’s landscape serves as a living archive of memory that crystallises itself. For her, memory not only resides in the oral traditions but also in geography: ‘But the old villagers who walk miles every day say: ‘When you look at the land you forget your aches and pains’ (2006, p. xi). Meanwhile, Temsula Ao’s works largely reflect the customs, traditions, practices, and beliefs of Nagaland’s Ao tribe, a community with its own extensive cultural heritage’ (Sentiya, 2022, p. 102). Her narrative of the lived experience draws on ancestral legacies of oral storytelling: ‘I have lived my life believing / Storytelling was my proud legacy’ (Misra, 2011, p. 83). Temsula Ao’s writings, bears the imprint of autoethnography and sense of belonging, reflecting the afflicted landscape of Nagaland: ‘These were, however, troubled times for the Nagas’ (Ao, 2006, p. 25). Gahatraj contends how storytelling becomes ‘a means for handing cultural values, practices and beliefs down to the younger generation’ (2014, p. 419). Dai & Ao’s work transforms folklore into a living archive of women’s endurance and resilience (Szecsi et al., 2024). This paves the way for the next section, which examines how folklore constructs widows as symbolic figures within collective remembrance, tracing how their identities are shaped through patriarchal ritualisation and cultural imagination.

WIDOWHOOD IN FOLKLORE: RECLAIMING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Folklore, as a crucial element of any culture, provides an essential understanding of earlier societies through the study of customs, traditions, and institutions. The Myths, legends, folk tales, and rituals, especially of the Adi and Naga tribes, are examples of cultural expressions that traverse the dynamic and deeply embedded aspects of the Northeast region. The reiteration of intergenerational transmission of folklore through oral narratives, traditional rituals, or practices inculcates a sense of individual belonging and a shared identity that fosters a sense of continuity among generations belonging to a particular community. As Meeta Deka asserts:

Folklore is an important source for the writing of history, particularly of the northeastern region of India (...) where there has been a dearth of written documents, archaeological and other evidence. As an alternative source, folklore is significant to explain and understand societies in the context of preserving cultural diversity and protecting minority cultures, especially those of indigenous peoples and marginalised social groups like the peasantry, labourers, ethnic tribes, and women. (2011, p. 173)

Although the scholarly interventions in folklore studies have recently gained momentum, carving a niche that brings forth suppressed pasts and hidden histories. In the literature of tribal regions, the transmission of history, myth, and other narratives is primarily oral; however, ‘(...) people are accustomed to remembering their histories and their ways of life through storytelling. These ways of storytelling have recently been designated as oral tradition’ (Ghosh, 2020, p. 32). Within patriarchal oral traditions, women are frequently confined within the larger cultural memory and are consigned to silence, rituals, and reproduction, turning them into stagnant mnemonic figures within the dynamic folkloric paradigm. As feminist folklorists such as Kousaleos observe, ‘feminist folklorists struggle to make a place for the study of women’s lives without asserting the existence of a universal women’s culture’ (1999, p. 22). The remembrance of such folkloric cultures emerges as sites of mnemonic economy that reflects upon the lived realities of marginalised groups, particularly widows from tribal regions who serve as both custodians and casualties of oral traditions that simultaneously deny them authorship and perpetuate atrocities against them. This defines the paradox of widowhood in folklore, where widows are entrusted to maintain the community’s oral and ritual memory, while simultaneously they are subjected to social and spiritual exclusion. As Elizabeth Vizovono describes:

The plight and helplessness of widows who could not remarry (...) various dynamics under which patriarchy functions according to caste, religion and ethnicity. Such complexities of caste problems or dowry, sati, female infanticide etc. (...) which causes gendered violence in other parts of the country, are not prevalent among the indigenous tribal communities. However, they suffer in other ways which are peculiar to their environment. (2021, p. 29)

Within this archaic folkloric paradigm, women after the death of their husbands are stigmatised, where they are viewed as ritually impure; her participation in festivities or communal gatherings is restricted, and her role is often confined to acts of devotion, mourning, and service. These conditions confine them with predefined roles, erode their social status, and intensify psychological and material hardships. These oral traditions render ‘aspects of gendered violence physical assault, verbal invectives, marital rape, psychological trauma and depression, all of which are borne in silence’ (Elizabeth, 2021, p. 31). Widows are enshrined within the bounds of the household, expected to offer complete devotion to tribal customs and beliefs, thereby situating them within the larger spectrum of collective identity. These conditions, which are rooted in patriarchal customs, define

the circumstances in which women are compelled to internalise silence as a virtue. In *Legends of Pensam*, Mamang Dai, while introducing Pinyar, mentions:

Despite her long, hard years she was lean and agile, and she had cropped her hair very short like a man's. She did, however, observe the traditional custom of wearing large cylindrical earrings that dragged her ears down, and she still wore all the beads, silver coins and amulets that she had put on as a young bride. (2006, p. 29)

The cultural markers bestowed on the widow describe their burdening reality and how they uphold their tradition. Similarly, the economic sustenance of a widow in these regions becomes a social anomaly as Ao describes the struggles of Libeni, 'From that time on, it was a lonely struggle for the mother, trying to cultivate a field and bring up a small child on her own' (2006, p. 24). This demonstrates how Pinyar and Libeni transform survival into an act of remembrance; their everyday labour whether cultivating, weaving, or narrating, becomes a site of cultural continuity feminine endurance of patriarchal norms. Furthermore, the domain of Indian folklore is deeply intertwined with spirits, gods, and mystical entities, and widows are expected to revere the associated rituals and belief systems. As Chauhan asserts, 'Folklore is not merely a static collection of artefacts from the past; it is constantly recreated, reinterpreted, and adapted through performance in response to changing social, political, and environmental contexts. Through storytelling, singing, dancing, or enacting rituals, folklore becomes a living expression, enabling communities to understand and negotiate their place in the world while addressing contemporary challenges' (Sharma et al., 2024, p. 4129). Within this dynamic framework, widows often become the primary transmitters of memory. Due to their assigned roles and the performative aspect of gender; when such cultural nuances codified in ancient scriptures are implemented and performed, it 'establishes social roles, leading to social performance that structures gender identification and naturalises a person's existence' (Kanwat & Kumar, 2022, p. 228), so their songs, gestures, and domestic rituals transforming into encoded forms of cultural continuity:

Women laboured with the domestic work, tended to the fields, while the men cleared the forests for firewood and cultivation. Women would weave body cloths and ceremonial shawls, make ornaments while men made tools, weapons and young boys were taught how to weave baskets. They also learnt about hunting and warfare which were critical to their survival and existence. (Pongener, 2017, p. 50)

Libeni's weaving of a shawl and Pinyar's preparation of *si-ye* cakes exemplify how domestic labour get transformed into an archive of care and continuity. These tribal widows through their daily work, bind the present generation to ancestral memory while simultaneously negotiating their grief and social exclusion which get embodied as acts of remembrance that these widows inscribe through material practices and oral retellings, binding the present generation to ancestral memory. 'Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These "others," however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past' (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 127). In a study on Nagaland widows and their connection to spirituality and coping Abigail Gurung mentions:

In a place like Nagaland, there are many traditional societal rules most of which are very patriarchal in nature. Without a male figure present, some families are sometimes excluded from social events or are not treated with enough respect. Widows also have to face a lot of financial worries now that they have to handle their finances on their own (...) Without the breadwinner of the house present, the widows have to come forward and somehow find ways to bring in the income that supports their family. (2025, p. 3114)

In 'The Last Song', Libeni resists familial pressure to remarry, choosing instead to raise her daughter Apenyo independently:

Many of the relatives told her to get married again so that she and little Apenyo would have a man to protect and look after them. But Libeni would not listen (...) So, mother and daughter lived alone and survived mainly on what was grown in the field. (Ao, 2006, p. 24)

Libeni's faith in God offered solace, yet she and her daughter were brutally killed (p. 25), revealing how resilience and tragedy coexist within the same maternal continuum. Similarly, Pinyar's narrative retrieves the suppressed memory of being a widow, which is embedded in oral culture: 'Her poor widow's house was gone (...) When a house catches fire, the luckless owner is banished to the outskirts of the village. So, Pinyar built herself a shack at the extreme edge of the forest' (Dai, 2006, p. 28). Her association with mystical beings and her craft links her to both empowerment and ostracism, as her husband's accidental death and the burning of her house mark her as cursed. Both the widows embody widowhood as a site of vulnerability, survival, and moral negotiation while lacking autonomy and economic security, yet they assert agency through care work and faith. Nuki Gammeng asserts:

The plight of every woman in Arunachal Pradesh can be identified in these lines. She can utilize and benefit from the property owned by her father, husband, and sons, but she does not have any share in ownership of that property (...) Adi society (...) Women have to be contented with whatever movable properties like beads, ornaments, traditional brass bowls and plates and sometime livestock she receives from her family. (2022, p. 44)

This embeds the notion that 'the patriarchal idea that women's life should be at the shadows of men is a highly constructed phenomenon shattering the self and social identities of women' (Priyadharshini & Padmanabhan,

2022). These widows endure not only social ostracism but also the psychological engendering of the culture that perpetuates their marginalisation. Both Libeni and Pinyar's survival and suffering are preserved in the community's collective consciousness, which highlights the injustices these widows face within their communities, reflecting the intergenerational confinement of patriarchal vicissitudes that silences women's suffering.

Through the narratives of Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai, the sombre dimensions of Northeastern folklore are revealed, illuminating how widows navigate within these mystic beliefs while enduring the sustained trauma. These widows become symbolic motifs that are re-inscribed with emotional depth and agency. Both authors, therefore, translate the 'forgotten widow' of tribal folklore into a postmemorial subject, where a figure through whom silenced histories are redefined, allowing the past to permeate within the present. Folklore of these tribal regions thus serves as a repository of cultural memory and knowledge, where widowhood engenders the stagnation of widows; meanwhile, their identities remain confined within inherited structures of remembrance. This underscores how personal narratives of writers reflect hidden cultural histories and micro-narratives, which position women like Pinyar and Libeni as embodiments of both trauma and resilience. Therefore, the active reading of these silences by subsequent generations confers both individual and communal memory with the nuances of ethical witnessing of their histories, which serves as a vital means of reconstructing history and giving voice to subjects previously silenced within patriarchal discourse.

WIDOWED MOTHERS IN FOLKLORE: ARCHETYPE OF STRENGTH AND SUFFERING

Building on the understanding of widows as custodians of both trauma and tradition, the following section turns to the figure of the 'widowed mothers' in folklore, who become an archetype that embodies both strength and suffering. Mitra, while quoting Jasodhara Bagchi, mentions the 'concept of 'mother,' where exhuming its paradox, manifestation, and lived reality within the Indian society. The paradox comprises the powerlessness and glorification of motherhood, which in turn legitimises the oppression that leaches motherhood of its joyful meaning' (2020, p.5). Mansi Bhalerao in her blog post, 'the notion of a woman being considered 'complete' only after marriage... indicates to us the unequal gendering and significance attributed to the marital status of women, equating their worth to the heteronormative imperatives of an 'ideal woman' in India' (Bhalerao, 2021). In India, motherhood places a woman between the dichotomies of resilience and defiance. Furthermore, Bagchi's insight into 'the binaries and oppositions characterising the social organisation of motherhood in India foregrounds the necessity of unravelling the various juxtaposed mythical realities which adorn the maternal psyche of Indian women' (Dey & Das, 2020, p. 66). Historically, mothers are assigned the role of compassionate humans who embody within themselves the power and primal instinct of care and protection, which culminates into forming a woman's identity that ensnares the essence of 'motherhood which should be a liberating and enriching experience thus becomes a captivating one for the human mother (2020, p. 67). Such tropes are prevalent signifiers that exist within the collective memory. Campbell contends:

(...) operative archetypal paradigm of the female hero is none other than the although the idea of 'the mother as hero' conveys a truth basic to female experience and to cultural values, it nonetheless imprisons women in an all-too-familiar conceptual and representational 'box.'" (Frontgia, 1991, p. 15)

Over time, such memory markers can infiltrate themselves through intergenerational transmission and keep solidifying the existing patriarchal notions around women. The Northeast, being marred by violence and socio-political issues, fosters a breeding ground for the perpetuation of gendered injustices against the underrepresented sections, like widowed mothers. 'Men became the protectors, warriors, and avengers; women, the symbols of the tribe's honour and the bearers of its shame' (Gorai, 2023, p. 5). These mothers not only preserve the remnants of cultural memory but also transform grief into moral endurance, becoming vital symbols of resilience within the collective consciousness. In the folklore of the Adi and Naga tribes, women occupy sacred spaces as guardians, warriors, and nurturers. The position of women is revered, exemplifying their existence within communities. As Barooah (2025) mentions in a blog:

Kecaikehati, worshipped in Malinithan on the borders of Arunachal Pradesh and historically linked with the Chutia kingdom, embodies an untamed aspect of motherhood, illustrating a pattern of the Northeast's Mothers who actively shape kingdoms, legitimise dynasties, and bind communities in covenant. Similarly, among the Nagas, Mianwenio is remembered as the fierce guardian of life, community, and identity, occupying a central place in oral histories and ritual observances.

However, this mythic veneration of motherhood finds a tragic inversion in the lived reality of widowed mothers who become sanctified in symbol yet silenced in experience. Thus, the phenomenon of motherhood becomes sacred and pious, with its appendages that lie within the religious and traditional spheres. As critics Khushboo & Pooja argue:

Indian society is not an exception to it! In India, the ideal woman is portrayed as the mother in popular culture. In many ancient religious scriptures, literature, mythologies, folk art, and culture, women are highly adorned and glorified as the personification of the divine mother goddess who facilitates man in the sacred act of procreation. Goddess is regarded as the utmost source of power and energy; they are the cause of everything present in the nature. (2024, p. 13256)

Mothers occupy a central position in folklore, embodying archetypes and ideals that shape cultural values across generations. Yet within this folkloric paradigm, widowed mothers are often reduced to monolithic figures whose identities revolve around domesticity, obedience, and dependence on male authority. As Gorai (2023) notes, communities have historically reinforced moral boundaries that glorify virtue with obedience and consider any deviation as transgression. She further reminds us about the vulnerabilities of hill women, and their suffering is deeply embedded in centuries of inter-tribal hostility, which remains overlooked. These mechanisms of control echo broader patriarchal structures in Indian folklore, where women's roles are defined through service and sacrifice. Coupled with coercive practices noted by Jatav (2022), widows continue to face economic restriction, ritual isolation, and profound social marginalisation. The folklore surrounding motherhood thus becomes a mnemonic site where these gendered hierarchies are both ritualised and reinforced. This subjects women as moral determiners of the household yet denies them social agency. In the tribal villages of the Northeast, distinct spaces and responsibilities are assigned to both men and women. As Esther Daimari asserts, '(...) in the tribal villages of Northeast, men and women have their own allotted space, which coincides with its responsibilities.' (Daimari, 2013, p. 1). The archetypal trope of a 'mother' subsumes the subjective facets of motherhood. 'Patriarchy, whether in its more traditional or modern form, constantly tries to glorify motherhood as the most prized vocation' (Bagchi, 1990, p. 65). These patriarchal and gendered dynamics shape societal expectations that confine women to their maternal roles, making their social value contingent upon their performance of care and duty they perform within their family and community. However, the roles are not that stringent; when we talk of the gendered spaces assigned to both men and women, it seems the region gives a false sense of participation as 'some women are shown to adhere more to their relational self and seem to draw their sense of meaning and happiness from association with others, from being part of, rather than apart from, a collective entity' (Daimari, 2013, p. 2).

Therefore, the primitive mores of these communities lead to economic travesties that leave less room for growth and sustenance, especially for women who occupy the domestic sphere in these societies. This gets magnified due to the persistent socio-political turmoil that has pervaded the region and has culminated in a perturbed scenario that afflicts women in a patriarchal society. Abu Sayad Rofi, in his article, observes, 'prestige of any family is attached to the 'feminine' members only, which limits the freedom for the women and forces them to spend their life under the periphery of patriarchal rule' (Rofi, 2022, p. 60). This depicts how women in these regions are shrouded in the garb of societal dignity and respect that marginalises them towards the patriarchal peripheries. 'The Naga community villages are divided into clans, and if anything goes wrong with any of the encircled families, it brings shame to the clan as well' (p. 60). However, if a woman is a mother and a widow, a causal imbalance is assured in the power dynamics that nudges the patriarchal order. Therefore, the multifarious hardships these widows endure reverberate in the narratives of Libeni and Pinyar. Both the widows are engulfed in burdensome lives owing to the lack of a provider and are relegated to the margins of society, that fosters an astute surveillance over them due to their confined status in society. Adding to the issue the aspect of violence is highlighted by Papori Bora, while mentioning Uma Chakravarti states:

Rape has been politicized as an issue which points to the construction of the gendered citizen in the context of militarization in the Northeast. As Chakravarti (2008) argues, this has had two types of consequences. First, democratic movements have used rape to seek accountability from the state when they took the matter to court as part of a larger human rights issue, and second, political parties have used it to emphasize women's vulnerability. (2010, p. 356)

In both stories, Pinyar and Libeni are despondent mothers who try to protect their children from tradition and inflicted state violence. These widows faced the hardship of being mothers. In 'The Last Song,' Libeni protects her daughter Apenyo from a tender age; due to the absence of her father Zhamben, Libeni strives hard for their survival and takes up menial jobs of shawl weaving and fieldwork. She is protective of her daughter but never feigns on Apenyo's inherent talent for singing, and she encourages her to take up her passion while protecting her from society's gaze. But due to the tragic event, she endures the pain of seeing her daughter being sexually assaulted and later murdered by the young army man, likewise, she undergoes a similar fate of gruesome death, as Ao describes Libeni's misery, when she says, 'the mother crazed by what she was witnessing, rushed forward with the animal-like growl as if to haul the man off her daughter's body, but the soldier grabbed her and pinned her down on the ground' (Ao, 2006, p. 28). The historical 'violence against women in the Northeast has roots deep in cultural as well as colonial history. The women are therefore marginalized at multiple levels' (Elizabeth, 2021, p. 28). Secondly, being a widow encompasses inherent failure of societal order and added injustices levied on them. This shows how, despite being the victim of state-inflicted violence, she painted a picture that depicted the resilience that enabled her to fight the army's brutality valiantly. Towards the end, the mother and her daughter are buried together, with their valour echoing throughout the generations.

Similarly, Orka separated Pinyar's son Kamur from her at a very tender age. Her son Kamur is assumed to be haunted by the evil spirit of the tiger, and because of this, he murders his own children, which causes a ruckus in the village. Following this, Pinyar wants the priests to help him as she believes that Kamur is haunted by evil spirits that caused him to undertake such a gruesome act in a sudden fit of unknown urge. However, the elders of the

village assert, he is not to blame. It is something in the blood. (...) There are men and women, guardians of history, who can identify this fault in the blood' (Dai, 2006, p. 392). This implies that a mother's role is historically anchored in her child's upbringing, making her solely responsible for their actions and characteristics. By transgressing the norms, Pinyar stands for her son against the powerful priests who held her accountable for the incident, despite this, '(...) she had rushed to be by the side of her long-lost son. She wept when she saw him, and she fought like a wild cat to shield him from the anger of the town' (Dai, 2006, p. 397). These instances in the stories depict how the widows get ostracised at every juncture of their lives due to their submission towards the normative, which reduces them to a stagnant entity within the dynamic patriarchal culture. These women are expected to embrace their widowhood and the role of a mother who caters to their family and community. This further problematises their situation, where they must learn to navigate the tensions between their individual and community interests. As Esther Daimari comments:

The condition of women is even worse during times of conflict and violence between the Centre and the State or among the different tribes of Northeast. Northeastern women face the brunt of conflicts between the Centre and the state and the atrocities of militarisation. Women during such movements become vulnerable, and women's bodies become sites of various complexities subjected to the male gaze, physical violence, and sexual politics. (Daimari, 2013, p. 3)

This also implies that motherhood coalesces into widowhood, which magnifies women's miseries by burdening them with the eternal glory of preserving the traditions and culture of the Northeast region. Due to this, their existence gets immersed in their children, and they are pushed into the realms of domesticity, which renders their purpose and a sense of inclusivity in the community. Furthermore, this fosters the notion of subordination of these women to the existing dogmas that curtail their upliftment and individuality. Libeni and Pinyar, despite their subjugation to folkloric vicissitudes and the socio-political turmoil, delineate the notion of resilience and reclaiming their power while subverting the confining patriarchal circumstances that insinuate the idea of subjection into their psyche, which condenses their identity and marginalises them. Thus, the widowed mother in Northeastern folklore becomes both the bearer and the burden of memory, who endures pain and silence, which is passed down as inherited emotions to the next generation witness. Through narratives like those of Libeni and Pinyar, folklore transforms into postmemory, reanimating women's resilience as both cultural heritage and unresolved grief.

CONCLUSION

The realms of folklore are infused with the intergenerational transmission of memory that enables the sustenance and existence of tribal communities. However, within this dynamic paradigm, widows remain stagnant figures who become a mnemonic site sustaining archaic traditional ideas and notions that shackle them within patriarchal bondage. These women remain economically deprived and rely on traditional work for survival. Due to a lack of autonomy, they are socially sanctified to conform to motherhood, which becomes an appendage to the misery and injustices they endure. The narratives of Libeni and Pinyar provide a kaleidoscopic view of the broader socio-cultural impediments, which represent the marginalised state of many such widows and their issues in the tribal communities. Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao have tried to delineate the perplexing state of these widows in their works by rendering them a voice and bringing them to the centre. Although these widows try to transgress and question the dogmatic rituals, they face violent implications for their actions, where Libeni dies during the civil unrest, and Pinyar faces social exclusion on the grounds of the interdiction of folkloric practices, which reinforces societal notions of what constitutes the ideal or 'consolidated' image of a woman.

While existing scholarship has explored women in Northeast Indian literature and the role of folklore as a living system in cultural memory, there is a dearth of studies that focus on how widows within these tribal regions become static figures and face injustices due to persistent warfare, captivity, and patriarchal control that relegate these widows to the margins. The paper revisits folktales of the Adi and Naga tribes and examines how the reflexive account of Mamang Dai's *Pinyar the Widow* and Temsula Ao's *The Last Song* renders an alternate narrative to these widows. This brings the widows of two tribes of the Northeast region to illuminate upon the broader societal issues. Through the means of literature and autoethnographic accounts, Mamang Dai and Temsula Ao become active bearers of postmemory and become an authentic source of such troubled histories. By doing so, they ethically witness forgotten histories and insert their indigenous perspectives to bring forth the suppressed and silent voices that often go unheard; this challenges the dominant discourses and prompts us to reconsider our own historical perspectives. In the light of intersecting domains of widowhood and motherhood within the larger purview of postmemory, this transmission of histories still remains an overlooked domain within literary, memory, and feminist scholarship discourse; Thus, these writers have attempted to intricately weave the narratives of these widows from their intergenerational experiences which enables the ethical witnessing by subsequent generations to the trauma and infliction of injustices on widows. Therefore, it becomes essential to challenge the rigid folkloric mores that question the grim existence of these widows in these tribal communities and to work towards elevating them from their marginalised status.

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