



Maternal Postmemory and Land Resilience in the Poetry of Jacinta Kerketta and Aruni Kashyap

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Abstract:

This article proposes a maternal-postmemory framework to examine intergenerational trauma, truth-telling, and land-based resilience in the poetry of two contemporary Indian Indigenous writers: Jacinta Kerketta (Oraon, Jharkhand) and Aruni Kashyap (Assam). Drawing primarily on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Gerald Vizenor's survivance, it argues that maternal figures and more-than-human kin (trees and rivers) serve as embodied transmitters of cultural memory and agents of Indigenous futurity amid ongoing dispossession and state violence. In Kerketta's *Angor* (2016) and *Land of the Roots* (2018), Oraon mothers and sacred forests resist extractive mining in Sârandâ. In Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News* (2021), Assamese mothers navigate the repetitive grief of the ULFA insurgency, with the Brahmaputra River embodying both trauma and transformation. These poetics function as polyphonic testimonios that contest necropolitical erasure while asserting land's pedagogical and resilient agency. The comparative reading contributes to postcolonial studies by foregrounding Indigenous maternal knowledge in India's internal-colonial regions.

Keywords: Postmemory, survivance, intergenerational trauma, land resilience, Indigenous feminism, Assam insurgency.

Adivasi and Northeast Indigenous literatures in India serve as crucial sites of theoretical intervention, where poetry enacts resistance against multilayered colonial and internal-colonial structures. This article proposes a maternal postmemory framework to examine intergenerational trauma, truth-telling, and land-based resilience in the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta (Oraon, Jharkhand) and Aruni Kashyap (Assam). Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (the affective transmission of trauma across generations) and Gerald Vizenor's notion of survivance (an active sense of presence, survival, and resistance beyond mere victimhood), the study argues that maternal figures and more-than-human kin, such as trees in Kerketta's work and the Brahmaputra River in Kashyap's, operate as embodied archives of cultural memory and agents of Indigenous futurity amid ongoing dispossession and state violence.

Kerketta and Kashyap write from distinct regions shaped by ecological exploitation, militarisation, and epistemological marginalisation. Kerketta's poetry emerges from the Sârandâ forests of Jharkhand, a landscape marked by biodiversity and mining-driven displacement. Her collections *Angor* and *Land of the Roots* represent Adivasi women, forests, rivers, and trees as repositories of knowledge and resistance. Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News* revisits the long aftermath of the ULFA insurgency through poems of political violence, bereavement, and survival. Its maternal voices register the intimate consequences of conflict, while the Brahmaputra River witnesses histories that official narratives attempt to suppress. Although the poets' geographical and cultural contexts remain distinct, both represent human life as inseparable from more-than-human worlds.

Reading Kerketta and Kashyap together constitutes a deliberate theoretical and political act. Jharkhand's mineral-rich forests and Assam's Brahmaputra valley exemplify India's internal-colonial spaces, marked by resource extraction, securitisation, and epistemological marginalisation

within the postcolonial state. Recent ecocritical and Indigenous studies affirm this framing: Soni and Ashrafi describe Kerketta's poetry as a commentary on "ecology, culture, and social injustice" (153). That formulation is valuable, but Kerketta's poems also demand attention to the relationship between ecological damage, maternal knowledge, and historical transmission. Placing her work alongside Kashyap's poetry makes it possible to develop a comparative feminist-Indigenous analytic that moves beyond representations of loss toward questions of testimony, agency, and futurity.

Kerketta has described her poetic practice as inherently political: "Writing as an Adivasi woman... is a political act in fact... my poetry and my politics are not really apart" (Kerketta, "TBR Interviews"). Kashyap's poetry similarly embeds individual testimonies within broader structures of state violence and communal memory. These poets develop a maternal postmemory poetics, a mode of witnessing that positions grieving, knowing, and resisting mothers as crucial agents of historical consciousness. In their poetry, personal lament becomes a form of testimony, while maternal memory functions as a means of transmitting not only the wounds of the past but also the knowledge and possibilities of resistance.

This study brings trauma studies, feminist theory, ecocriticism, and Indigenous methodologies into conversation without treating any one theoretical model as an interpretive template imposed upon the poems. The analysis remains attentive to the poets' imagery, rhythms, cultural references, and activist commitments. Its primary concepts are Hirsch's postmemory and Vizenor's survivance, supplemented by ecocritical and postcolonial approaches to slow violence, witnessing, ungrievable life, and necropolitical power. Margaret Kovach's emphasis on relationality, reciprocity, and accountability further informs the article's methodological

orientation. Since the study examines published poems and documented public statements, it does not involve new human-subjects research.

Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as “the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they remember only by means of stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up” (106). This memory is mediated “through imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (107). In Kerketta’s and Kashyap’s poetics, postmemory exceeds passive inheritance; it becomes an embodied practice enacted through maternal figures, forests, trees, and rivers. Kerketta’s mothers and forests preserve the memory of mining violence while transmitting knowledge of ecological resistance. Kashyap’s mothers, confronting repetitive loss in the aftermath of the ULFA insurgency, register trauma through bodily and riverine rhythms, as the Brahmaputra absorbs and recirculates grief. These figures transform inherited suffering into survivance, Vizenor’s “active sense of presence” and renunciation of “dominance, tragedy and victimry” (vii). Thus, land becomes not a passive backdrop but a resilient co-witness and a source of Indigenous futurity.

Ecocriticism and Indigenous feminism provide complementary lenses for reading this relationship between postmemory, survivance, and land. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm describe ecocriticism as an “earth-centred approach” that examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). This perspective illuminates the poets’ biocentric worldview, in which humans and nonhumans exist through relational rather than hierarchical connections. Malwika’s reading of Kerketta similarly highlights the ecological and cultural significance of the forest (92). Vandana Shiva’s critique of “maldevelopment” further sharpens this framework by showing how extractive systems violate “the integrity of organic, interconnected, and interdependent systems” (5). These ecological concerns intersect with Cathy

Caruth's account of trauma as unclaimed experience, Carolyn Forché's poetry of witness, Judith Butler's analysis of ungrievable lives, and Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics. Margaret Kovach's relational Indigenous methodology further guides the analysis by emphasising reciprocity, respect, and accountability.

In Jacinta Kerketta's poetry, land dispossession and its transgenerational psychic wounds are intimately entangled with the living forest. In "Why the Mahua Is Not Plucked from the Tree," the sacred mahua tree functions as both maternal body and pedagogical figure. The daughter asks:

Mother, why do you wait all night
for the mahua to drop?
Why don't you
just pluck all the mahua from the tree?

Mother says –

They live in the womb all night long.

When the time for their birth comes

They fall by themselves to the earth. (Kerketta, "Two Poems")

The daughter's impatient question embodies the extractive temporality of capitalist development and mining-driven dispossession in Sârandâ. The mother's reply, by contrast, enacts a relational ontology grounded in patience, reciprocity, and respect for the tree's autonomous rhythms. As Malwika demonstrates in her ecocritical reading, such moments articulate a "biocentric ethics of care" that resists developmental violence by sustaining the forest's vitality rather than maximising short-term yield (94). This maternal lesson transmits more than ecological knowledge: it models an epistemological resistance that the daughter internalises, turning postmemory into a living

pedagogy of rooted survivance. The poem “Care” extends this maternal-ecological ethic through the ordinary labour of gathering fuel:

I scour the woods,
Climb over hills,
Wander the whole day
For dry firewood — just one bundle —
As I’m wary of cutting a living tree,
Out of care for my jungle. (Kerketta, *Land of the Roots* 165)

The speaker’s labour resists the logic of indiscriminate extraction. Gathering only dry wood becomes an ethical act of protecting the forest’s continued life. The daughter who witnesses this labour inherits not only ecological knowledge but also a critique of the developmental violence that has damaged Sârandâ. Maternal postmemory thus connects everyday practices of care with historical consciousness.

The poem “Bloodstained Rivers” extends Kerketta’s maternal ecology into a broader landscape of witnessing, personifying the forest’s rivers as grieving participants in collective mourning:

Hands stained with the blood
Of a thousand slaughtered trees
Quietly wash themselves clean
In the rivers of Sârandâ.
And the waters drenched in blood bewail,
Weeping on the shoulders of riverbanks,
And the entire forest sees red.

...

Eyes seeking the truth cower,
 Starving voices, raised in protest,
 Nibble at morsels of hope and solace,
 While endless streams of desperate tears
 Weep the bloodstained rivers. (Kerketta, *Angor* 85)

The river does not merely reflect human suffering. It absorbs, mourns, and carries the violence of deforestation, becoming a more-than-human co-witness. The image of water “drenched in blood” connects ecological destruction with collective grief. Soni and Ashrafi note that Kerketta repeatedly contrasts the sensory abundance of the forest with the “stench of machines” and “noise of explosions” that dominate Adivasi life (155–56). That contrast is sharply visible in “The Blossoms of Sârandâ”:

Deep in blissful slumber
 The flowers perfume
 Startles and awakens,
 When the stench of machines
 Invades the senses
 And ears scream in splitting pain
 From the noise of explosions. (Kerketta, *Angor* 25)

The poem’s sensory dissonance records the disruption of ecological and cultural rhythms. The forest’s former fragrance is invaded by industrial smell, while its quiet is replaced by mechanical noise. Maternal postmemory operates here through ecological attunement: later generations inherit both the memory of a living forest and the experience of its wounded present.

In Kashyap's *There Is No Good Time for Bad News*, the transmission of intergenerational trauma assumes a structurally parallel yet materially distinct form. While Kerketta's mothers model ecological patience and reciprocity with the forest, Kashyap's mothers navigate repetitive encounters with state violence. In "How I Felt a Week After My Son Left to Join the Militant Organisation," maternal anxiety manifests as visceral bodily disintegration:

Something feels wrong constantly. The switchboard
 creaks like wrought wood doors
 in abandoned houses of kings...
 My heart skips so much; it flaps like a headless hen dripping blood,
 spreading dust through its refusing-to-die wings.
 The dust settles on me like sediments and
 refuses to leave. I sweat,
 go breathless, feel cold. I think I will faint. (Kashyap 38)

The mother's body registers catastrophe before the mind can fully comprehend it. The son has not yet been confirmed dead, but the body already experiences the possibility of loss. This is trauma as belated and anticipatory knowledge. The poem also stages what Felman and Laub describe as a "crisis of witnessing," in which violence becomes an experience that is simultaneously felt, remembered, and difficult to narrate (15).

The two poets consequently represent postmemory through a shared temporal structure. Kerketta's mothers transmit trauma and resistance through the gradual destruction of forests, while Kashyap's mothers endure the repeated disappearance, arrest, or death of sons. In both bodies and landscapes, violence becomes cumulative. Maternal figures and nonhuman entities function as

living archives, preserving inherited pain while transforming it into forms of testimony, memory, and resistance.

In both Kerketta's and Kashyap's poetics, memory is not a passive repository but a dynamic practice of resistance and survivance. It transmits, contests, and reconfigures trauma across generations through maternal and nonhuman agencies. Kerketta's "The Jungle Says" foregrounds the forest itself as primary educator and memory-keeper, enacting survivance through nonhuman pedagogy:

A man of the jungle learns
The art of walking from its meandering trails.
The trees teach him to grow and blossom.
To dance he learns from the rollicking rain.
And songs,
Like mushrooms,
Burst forth naturally. (Kerketta, *Land of the Roots* 77)

This forest-as-teacher figure forms the epistemological core of Kerketta's maternal-postmemory framework. Trees, trails, rain, and mushrooms transmit not mere resources but embodied cultural knowledge, bodily rhythms, and an ontology of belonging. The later turn of the poem poignantly reveals the consequences of severance:

And so, they build roads
Leading out of the jungle's cover.
For they know one day,
Following these roads, he will be led astray,
And all will be wiped away:

His meandering walk,
His rollicking dance. (77)

The road becomes more than an instrument of physical development. It threatens to sever the relationship between the community and the forest as a source of knowledge and cultural memory. Malwika describes this danger as “cultural amnesia and a sense of rootlessness” (96). In Kerketta’s poem, development becomes destructive when it interrupts the cultural practices through which people learn how to belong to the land. This nonhuman pedagogy is inseparable from maternal postmemory. Mothers transmit both the memory of ecological harmony and the grief of its destruction. Together, mother and forest form a resistant archive through which inherited trauma becomes rooted survivance, challenging slow violence and internal-colonial erasure (Nixon).

Kerketta’s short, incisive poem “Waiting” deploys a stark rhetorical reversal to expose the civilisational arrogance underwriting Adivasi dispossession: “They are waiting for us to become civilised / And we are waiting for them to become human” (Kerketta, “Two Poems”). The poem exposes the arrogance of the civilising mission by turning its language back upon the colonising subject. Its brevity intensifies the reversal: the community represented as uncivilised becomes the one that questions the humanity of those who dispossess and dominate.

The poem “The River, the Mountain, and the Bazaar” dramatises the postmemory structure of intergenerational transmission with haunting clarity:

Coming upon a narrow path
Amidst dry and withered trees,
I said to little Posterity,
Look, ’tis where the village river used to be.

A deep furrow in the ground ahead,
Swallowed all the mountains, I said.

...

'Tis where the barns of your ancestors used to be. (Kerketta, *Angor* 33)

The adult speaker cannot offer the child a living river or standing mountain. Instead, she transmits their disappearance. The child's physical response turns historical loss into embodied knowledge. Through the elder's narration, ecological destruction becomes a familial and intergenerational memory.

In Kashyap's "The Militant's Mother: A Letter," an intimate epistle to an absent insurgent son, the mother transmits trauma through a precise recollection of the father's torture:

Your father startles at night. He hasn't forgotten how the officer
asked him to frog-jump in front of his students for
raising you...
he frog-jumped forty times in his underwear from one end
of the field to the other, until he reached the silk-cotton tree. (Kashyap 41)

The exactness of the memory: "forty times" and the silk-cotton tree, turns humiliation into evidence. The mother's letter refuses the event's erasure and ensures that the son inherits its political meaning. The poem's domestic postscript extends this resistance into everyday life:

PS: Baba, please come. Send news with the milkman or the fish seller...
When the fish seller brings a bunch of boriola fish
and suggests cooking it with mustard, I know what he means. (42).

The household becomes a coded archive in which food, vendors, and domestic routine sustain communication. Maternal memory is therefore not only retrospective; it enables survival in the

present. “Spring 1979” expands this maternal memory-work into a collective register. The poem describes a woman who repeatedly visits the morgue in search of her son:

I have only heard about that woman
 who returns every month, sometimes even twice,
 from the morgue with the smell of corpses
 stuck to her nostrils, clothes and hands...
 and only because she wants to know if one of those
 is her son who took a whole sky away with him
 when he merged with the forests. (46)

Her repeated return embodies trauma’s compulsion to revisit what cannot be fully assimilated. Her singing preserves the memory of the dead against official silence. Lament here is not passive grief; it is a form of public remembrance.

Women’s laments in both poets’ works function as ceremonies of truth-telling. Kerketta’s “The Weapons in My Hands” presents a wounded mother who explains the political meaning of her struggle:

We are fighting
 For our land, for our soil,
 And to preserve our very being.
 A fight you too must fight after me. (Kerketta, *Angor* 59)

The poem then expands the wound into historical depth:

They may see only the militancy,
 But their eyes fail to see
 My centuries-old agony,

Wounds afflicted ages upon,
Still fresh, still raw... (Kerketta, *Angor* 59)

The phrase “centuries-old agony” gives the mother’s protest a historical depth that exceeds the state’s immediate description of militancy. Her wounded body becomes an archive of dispossession, while her instruction to the son transforms memory into an obligation to continue the struggle. Malwika observes that such poems reveal how tribal communities are labelled “militants” when they assert their rights, while the historical causes of resistance remain ignored (97).

Kashyap’s most sustained truth-telling ceremony appears in the title poem “There Is No Good Time for Bad News.” Its nine-section structure cumulatively unfolds the bureaucratic horror of a police official repeatedly summoning a mother to identify bodies. The fifth section exposes the banal normalisation of atrocity:

Now,

I have chai and samosas

while preparing the inventory: a diary,

a notebook...

Every year,

the number of bodies I see

are thousands and it doesn’t

matter when I deliver the news. There is no

good time for bad news. (Kashyap 27)

The juxtaposition of food, paperwork, weapons, and corpses reveals the bureaucratic normalisation of violence. Death becomes an administrative routine rather than an event that demands ethical

response. Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is useful here because the state's power appears through its capacity to classify bodies, determine their value, and manage their deaths. The mother's identification of the body disrupts this administrative logic:

She presses her palm
across his forehead, holds my hand,
and says,
it is him,
this blood on the floor is my blood,
this body on the desk is my flesh... (Kashyap 31–32)

By declaring “this blood on the floor is my blood, / this body on the desk is my flesh,” the mother reclaims her son's body from the state's administrative classification. She refuses to let him remain merely an inventory item or an “enemy” corpse. Her assertion establishes a bodily continuity between mother and son, challenging the necropolitical logic through which certain lives are rendered disposable (Mbembe 66). Her saint-like calm does not signify an absence of grief; it suggests the exhaustion produced by repeated encounters with state violence. This composure transforms into an act of survivance, through which the subject refuses the script of victimhood imposed by the regime.

Judith Butler's analysis of “ungrievable lives” further illuminates this scene. Dominant regimes determine which bodies merit public mourning and which are excluded from collective grief (38). Kashyap's mother resists this exclusion by asserting the reality of her loss despite the state's failure to acknowledge it. Her calm dignity transforms repetitive trauma into quiet defiance and models a form of maternal postmemory that bears witness without surrendering to victimhood. The poem thus presents maternal grief as a feminist practice of truth-telling and endurance.

“My Aunt Talks About Being Raped By Soldiers” makes the demand for testimony explicit. The aunt insists:

please do write everything
on your paper’s front page
along with my picture. (Kashyap 35).

Her demand transforms private violation into public documentation. The statement “until it had become my habit to stop resisting” represents violence as an attritional process that gradually destroys bodily autonomy rather than producing only one identifiable moment of rupture (35). This is the intimate form of what Nixon calls slow violence.

The poem “Freedom” positions the Brahmaputra River as a scarred witness to redefinitions of freedom itself:

on the ruddy rivers
where, instead of fishes,
chopped limbs stuck in the nets of fishermen...

Often freedom was written
between the legs of women
left bleeding. (Kashyap 57)

The river becomes a repository of dismembered bodies and gendered violence. The poem’s concluding assertion—“Definitions have always / belonged to the definers,” exposes the political power involved in naming freedom, criminality, and justice. Maternal and female voices challenge the state’s authority to define violence from above and reclaim the right to narrate lived reality (57).

Resilience in Kerketta's and Kashyap's poetry does not emerge from state-centred narratives of development or post-conflict recovery. It arises through the land's agency and its intimate relationship with maternal knowledge. Forests, rivers, trees, and mothers function as witnesses and teachers, transforming inherited trauma into forms of survivance. In Kerketta's poetry, resilience manifests through sharp irony and quiet defiance. The poem "Huffing and Puffing Machines" exposes the self-defeating logic of extractive capitalism:

Having uprooted the trees

Out of breath are the machines.

And now these huffing and puffing machines

Are you searching for the cool shade of a tree? (Kerketta, *Land of the Roots* 119)

The machines have destroyed the very forest that could offer them shade. This reversal makes industrial development appear absurd and self-destructive. The poem's irony reveals the self-defeating nature of extractive logic, which ultimately erodes the very conditions that sustain its existence. In Kerketta's vision, the forest's absence becomes its most eloquent protest, enacting survivance through ecological irony. She extends this critique into an aspirational Indigenous futurity in "For the Grass and the Flowers":

I wish to wander the earth

In search of such a city

That has done all in its power

To save

The grass and the flowers,

Fought a battle for the sake of the blades of grass.

(Kerketta, *Land of the Roots* 119)

The poem does not offer romantic escape from political reality. Instead, it imagines a society in which care for the smallest forms of life becomes the basis of ethical and political value. Maternal labour and ecological attention provide the foundation for this alternative futurity.

The epistemological foundation of this resilience emerges most clearly in Kerketta's recurring poem "The Jungle Says," which affirms diversity as vital to ecological and cultural survival:

The jungle says
An ocean it can never be,
For in its merging into the ocean
Every river is stripped of its identity.
The jungle alone sustains,
Each with its identity it maintains. (Kerketta, *Land of the Roots* 77)

The jungle rejects a homogenising model of unity. Its ecological vision depends on preserving distinct rivers, species, communities, and identities. Within the maternal-postmemory framework, the forest becomes both archive and teacher, transmitting a pluralistic understanding of belonging.

In Aruni Kashyap's poetry, land resilience finds expression through the Brahmaputra River's ambivalent, transformative agency. In "Spring 1979," the river carries the blood of the insurgency's dead while gesturing toward healing. The fifth section shifts from accumulated grief to a tentative yet powerful assertion of futurity:

But one day we all shall come back, with different stories
this time, with a belief in the river's power
to transform pain into joy during censored times...
or maybe a song

and a terrible beauty to be born. (Kashyap 47)

The phrase “censored times” indicates that futurity must be created within conditions of surveillance and repression. The river does not erase trauma; it transforms the relation to trauma through story, song, and collective memory. This creative continuance corresponds to Vizenor’s concept of survivance.

The Brahmaputra connects local memory with distant rivers and imagined geographies. Its “redness” evokes natural sediment as well as the violence of insurgency. In this sense, the river resembles Glissant’s concept of “Relation”: it holds multiple histories without reducing them to a single narrative (159).

Both poets also use language to resist cultural erasure. Kerketta incorporates regional and Indigenous ecological vocabulary into her poetry, while Kashyap introduces Assamese cultural markers such as boriola fish, gamusa, payas, and fish-tenga into English verse. These linguistic choices preserve cultural specificity and challenge homogenising national and global narratives. Language becomes an extension of land resilience: it carries memory, names local worlds, and keeps Indigenous relations audible within dominant literary languages.

Kerketta and Kashyap reconfigure the relationship between land, memory, and futurity through a maternal-postmemory poetics. Their poems place maternal knowledge, nonhuman kinship, and intergenerational transmission at the centre of Indigenous literary analysis. Mothers, forests, trees, and rivers do not merely represent suffering; they interpret violence, preserve cultural memory, and generate forms of survivance. Through these figures, personal laments become polyphonic testimonios that challenge the necropolitical governance of India’s internal-colonial regions.

The Adivasi mother emerges as the emotional and ethical core of this poetics. She is the woman labouring at dawn for dry firewood while teaching her child the sovereignty of the living tree; the mother wounded during a protest; the woman who returns repeatedly to the morgue to identify a body; and the one who walks out of the police station “with the calmness of a saint, / bright like burnt gold” (Kashyap 31–32). Her body and voice register the cumulative effects of what Rob Nixon calls slow violence. Both Kerketta and Kashyap render this violence through restrained formal strategies: recurring images, understated devastation, coded domestic acts, and laments that exceed the limits of private grief. As Prajapati observes, Kerketta’s poems represent women’s suffering while also presenting them as embodiments of “resilience, spirit, courage and bravery” (657). Kashyap’s collection offers a parallel insistence: the women of Assam’s insurgency years are not collateral figures in history but its primary witnesses and survivors.

This comparative reading does not erase the differences between Oraon and Assamese cultural worlds. Kerketta’s Sârândâ forest and Kashyap’s Brahmaputra valley are not interchangeable symbols. Each landscape possesses its own history, language, cosmology, and forms of attachment. Their significance lies precisely in this particularity. The comparison reveals how distinct Indigenous traditions can enter into solidarity without surrendering their differences.

As Kerketta’s title *Angor* suggests, what appears extinguished has not finished burning. The river continues to carry what the state has attempted to bury. The mahua tree drops its flowers in its own unhurried time. Mothers continue to preserve the knowledge of what has been lost and what remains possible. Their embodied postmemory forms a bridge between historical trauma and Indigenous futurity. “Definitions have always / belonged to the definers,” Kashyap writes (57). Through their poetry, Kerketta and Kashyap reclaim the authority to define—to name the dead, the land, the violence, and the future.

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