RESILIENCE ON REEL: REFRAMING ETHNIC VIOLENCE THROUGH WOMEN'S MEMORY IN BODO CINEMA
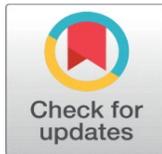
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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representation of women within Bodo-language films produced about the Bodoland Movement; a mid-to-late twentieth century movement for self-autonomy for the Bodoland region of Assam, India. Utilizing a combination of feminist film theories and cultural trauma studies as theoretical frameworks, this research utilizes a qualitative method of textual analysis of selected Bodo-language films to assess how women's roles, experiences, and agency are represented during the time of the Bodoland Movement and the subsequent ethnic insurgency/conflict. The films are analyzed for narrative and visual representations of gender, memory, and trauma. Results indicated that Bodo filmmakers have challenged traditional gender stereotyping in their depiction of women's agency and memory; instead of being presented simply as passive victims of violence, female characters in the films analyzed are presented as survivors who are capable of resilience and hope. As such, the films provide an "afterlife" of the conflict experienced during the Bodoland Movement – providing a powerful narrative of survival rather than a linear history of trauma. This research provides a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics present in Bodo cinema and demonstrates that the portrayal of women in Bodoland movement films reflects the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and political upheaval and serves as a platform for collective memory and trauma.

Keywords: Bodo Cinema, Bodoland Movement, Women's Representation, Memory, Traumat

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bodoland Movement was a protracted ethno-political violence conflict that occurred in Assam, North East India, lasting through the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. The Bodoland movement was initially a demand for a separate state by the Bodo tribe – the largest tribal community in Assam – but eventually turned into "unending cycle of violence and human suffering" resulting in deaths and massive displacement Sarma (2017). The prolonged conflict had left severe emotional and psychological scar to the Bodo population; essentially creating what cultural theorists call cultural trauma - a horrific shared experience which leaves "indelible marks upon [a group's] consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways " Alexander (2004). With

efforts being made to move forward toward peace in the region, there are growing attempts to reflect on and understand the legacy of the conflict. Bodo-language film has emerged as one of the most critical mediums in this process; recent films have focused on the memories of the conflict and have centered women's experiences within that historical trauma. Film scholars have long recognized that film is a powerful medium for recording and preserving cultural memory, particularly when it comes to war and conflict: "as a leading medium of memory, war films create and shape images and narratives of war experience" Erll (2012). In societies dealing with recovery from violence, film can be a means of "audiovisual vector[s] of catharsis" and provide a unique and powerful method of aiding in "innovative and effective tool[s] in the process of reconstructing collective memory in the aftermath of traumatic events" Ulfe et al. (2022). In addition, because film provides a way to personify history, dramatize different perspectives and create emotional empathy with the viewer, film can provide a perspective on history beyond mere factual reporting. This ability of film to allow viewers to connect abstract historical events to relatable human experiences significantly impact how viewers view those historical events Zhao and Chsing (2023). These cinematic portrayals also represent how memory of violent events are created and presented and also represent the human experience of conflict through a variety of artistic approaches and narrative styles Jacob (2022).

War and political conflict have long been viewed as primarily involving male members of a society – males being seen as protectors of family, land, etc., while females and children are relegated to the periphery of conflict as those who need protecting Cacqueray (2008). The same holds true for cinema, which reflects the gendered divisions evident in war films and insurgency movies; most classic films feature women as the symbol of home, as nurses or as the lover waiting in the wings, as tragic victims of war, or as the occasional soldier but rarely as an active participant/decision maker in war efforts Alberi (2016). In her seminal essay on the male gaze, Mulvey (1975) contends that in mainstream film "women are...displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men" and are objectified as passive bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning. Academic analyses argue that it is a mistake to view women only as hapless victims of war; doing so ignores their agency and the "crucial role" they often assume in sustaining social fabric and cultivating peace at the grassroots level Pierson (2019), Arostegui (2013), Smith (2020). Therefore, this paper examines how Bodo language films represent women against the backdrop of conflict and tries to address the following questions: (i) How do Bodo language films portray the roles and experiences of women during the Bodo conflict? (ii) Do these films reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes present in conflict narratives? (iii) What type of role do these films serve as repositories of cultural memory and trauma?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of selected Bodo-language films. The research design is exploratory and interpretive, appropriate for uncovering nuanced themes in narrative and visual content. Below we outline the data selection and analysis procedures:

2.1. FILM SELECTION

A purposive sampling of feature films was conducted in which Bodo-language films were selected based upon their theme centered around the Bodoland Movement and its aftermath. The films were selected from the IMDb database by utilizing keywords such as "Bodo," "Bodoland," "insurgency," "ethnic conflict," and "autonomy movement." The selection criteria included: (i) the Bodo language being used as the primary language for the film; (ii) the storyline including the Bodoland insurgency and/or the sociopolitical effects of the Bodoland insurgency; (iii) the presence of at least one prominent female character within the film with whom the narrative of the conflict is conveyed. As a result of these criteria, three feature films were identified for inclusion in the analysis as central texts: Dau Huduni Methai (2015), Jwlwi – The Seed (2019) and Gorai Phakhri (2023).

2.2. DATA ANALYSIS

Each film was viewed multiple times to allow for immersion into the stories told and the visual elements presented. The researchers analyzed the films as texts by evaluating both narrative content (plot, dialogue, character development, and themes) and cinematic form (mise-en-scene, cinematography, sound, and editing). Following viewing of each film, the films were coded in six areas: Women's Roles, Portrayals of Violence, Agency and Resistance, Memory and

Flashbacks, Trauma and Emotion, and Imagery/Symbols. Elements of narrative analysis (evaluation of story structure and character arc) and thematic analysis (identification of patterns in representation of gender and memory) were used in coding the films.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
3.1. WOMEN'S ROLE

Jwlwi: The Seed, Gorai Phakhri, and Dau Huduni Methai each feature significant women characters. Alaari is the primary character in Jwlwi: The Seed and she is portrayed as a "strong woman" who loses her husband to conflict and continues to fight to keep her family safe. She also attempts to steer her son away from the conflict. Gorai Phakhri is unique as it features an all-female cast. Mainao, Gaodang and Malothi are the principle characters in Gorai Phakhri and all are connected through blood or village relations. Each of the women in the film are depicted as keeping their families intact. Mainao is a single mother who lost her husband (he was a rebel) to security forces, and Gaodang's husband is an army soldier stationed at the border. Malothi is a village elder who was a victim of a gang-rape by an army patrol during the conflict. Preeti, a visiting doctoral student, is portrayed as a female outsider whose expectations are challenged. In the intentional absence of men, Gorai Phakhri highlights the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Women in Gorai Phakhri have taken on a multitude of responsibilities: caring for children, managing households alone, and maintaining relationships with the rest of the community. Through depicting these roles, the film demonstrates how women have been forced to become sole caregivers and community pillars due to the war. In Dau Huduni Methai, Raimali, a young Bodo woman, is raped by a member of a conflicting group. Along with her mother and grandmother, Raimali represents the different generations of women within the same family. The narrative depicts Raimali as isolated and reflective, recounting her personal story of survival and loss, placing her as a witness and storyteller for women's experiences. All three films portray women as having active and prominent roles.

3.2. PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE

Jwlwi: The Seed is predominantly experienced through its aftermath, as opposed to violence on screen. The filmmakers have elected to "not portray the violence," but instead "refer" to it; such as the youth being taken away by the Army, or dying out of view. Rather than showing violent battles with firearms, the audience observes the fear and the suffering portrayed upon family life; people live under a cloud of suspicion, and they are constantly fearful. The film uses an absence of violence, and builds a growing emotional response from watching a family's separation. The female characters are portrayed as experiencing loss, and trauma, while the male characters are either absent, or victimized. Gorai Phakhri clearly illustrates gendered violence towards women. The most graphic depiction of this type of violence is when Malothi is gang-raped, and the violence she suffers at the hands of the Armed Forces is exemplified in the brutality they inflict upon Bodo women. Additionally, the fact that her husband abandons her after viewing her as "unclean" due to her rape, further emphasizes societal stigma. Indirect violence is also depicted within the films narrative, for example: Mainaos' grief over the murder of her rebel husband, and Gaodangs' fear for her soldier husbands' safety, illustrate the pervasive threat of conflict. The films narrative illustrates both prolonged armed conflict, and the personal toll on tribal women. Dau Huduni Methai explicitly depicts violence through Raimalis experience. In addition, the films narrative frequently references the brutality of conflict, as Raimali continually reflects on how the violence of the conflict has impacted her life, and that of her lover and their families. While Jwlwi portrays violence as background story, Dau Huduni Methai portrays violence as symbolic (the horned owl myth), and physical violence to women (rape), as well as collateral violence (recruitment, and killings) are two of the major themes. The movie's portrayal of violence is also much more raw, as the camera lingers on Raimalis scars, which makes the conflicts effect on women visually horrific.

3.3. AGENCY OF RESISTANCE

Although Alaari's resistance to the patriarchal society and rebellion during Jwlwi: The Seed is non-violent (moral), her ability to resist is a result of the internal struggles she faces. She continues to resist by choosing to hold onto hope and will to move forward; in contrast to the loss of two men in her life, she has chosen to carry their burdens along with her pain. In addition, Alaari resists both the societal expectations of being a woman and the rebellion by choosing not to

allow her son to participate. Through daily acts of courage (caring for her family, continuing traditions and instilling hope), Alaari demonstrates her agency. Furthermore, the women of Jwlwi: The Seed show an example of how women can demonstrate resilience by showing compassion and enduring hardships that those around them succumb to as a result of their fears. Women in Gorai Phakhri also display examples of resilience while facing oppressive situations. Mainao and Gaodaang are an example of how women can provide support and comfort for one another during difficult times such as widowhood and marriage issues. Malothi, who was victimized, chose to alone in the village and eventually formed bonds with the other women. The story of Gorai Phakhri is composed of interweaving stories about women from the village forming alliances against the patriarchal society and the women demonstrating their ability to endure adversity as well as social chaos, focusing exclusively on the experiences of women in order to emphasize the female perspective and eliminate the focus on male characters.

3.4. MEMORY AND FLASHBACKS

All three films use memory in their narratives. Jwlwi: The Seed takes a two generation approach to its conflict and uses personal memory to connect past and present. Often the film will reflect back to previous events in its narrative; Alaari's memories of her husbands' death and previous crises are incorporated throughout the story. Flash-back like sequences can be seen when characters recall the horrific experiences of being affected by AFSPA. Memory connects the viewer to both the personal trauma experienced by the characters and the historical context in which this occurred: Alaari's current struggle is weighed down by the legacy of the insurgency. Although the film has no heavy reliance on dream sequences, it's non-linear style creates a space where both personal and collective memory can emerge. Overall Jwlwi: The Seed provides constant reminders to the viewer of the wound inflicted by the insurgency during the 1990s and how those wounds continue to reside within the psyche of the family. Similarly in Gorai Phakri, Gaodaang and Mainao have lived through decades of conflict and this past shapes their lives; and the film illustrates how the women "heal" from the decades of armed conflict. Malothi recalls memories of the assault she was subjected to and her husband's cruel actions through both internal reflection and dialogue. Temporal shifts are used in the film to demonstrate this example; Preeti's romanticized view of village life begins to collapse illustrating the difference between her past expectations and present reality. The entire film Dau Huduni Methai is constructed around Raimali's memories. Mentally she returns to past events while physically remaining in an abandoned home. The screenplay frequently transitions to flash backs of her pre-rape life with her lover, and the violent ambush they encountered. The film also blends mythic past with recent history by utilizing the myth of the horned owl (Hudu), which is a form of collective memory invoked by Raimali. Like the past, Raimali's memories also intertwine the personal and communal history of her past trauma, which continues to exist in the present.

3.5. TRAUMA AND EMOTION

Jwliwi: The Seed presents the audience with Alaari's pain, her fear, and her anguish caused by years of violence. By the end of the film, Alaari has moved from the point of despair, to a somewhat hopeful outlook – the ending is described as a "ray of light" at the conclusion of her difficult journey; this emotional arc indicates healing; Alaari has survived her nightmares, and has chosen to move forward because of the need to protect her grandson. Therefore, the women's emotional experiences are central to the narrative, and make trauma visible, both through their physical appearance, and their interior lives. In Gorai Phakri, all three of the main female characters have visual evidence of the trauma they experienced: Mainao mourns her dead husband, Gaodaang is anxious about the fact that her soldier husband is posted in the border, and Malothi is traumatized by her rape. The film visually portrays the emotional aftermath of the events of the film -- Malothi's despair and her ostracism is a very disturbing example of sexual and social trauma. The film's resolution revolves around the healing of fractured families, which indicates that the film does not shy away from portraying the pain, rather resolves the story. Because the entire cast is female, the audience views the women experiencing fear, grief, and ultimately hope as they support one another. The emotional center of the film is based upon the way these women support one another: their unity provides a contrast to isolation. Gorai Phakhri adds depth to the emotional experiences of women during times of conflict, and portrays the emotional consequences of the conflict on these women. The trauma suffered by Raimali is the focal point of the Dau Huduni Methai. Since Raimali is a recent rape victim, she exhibits shock, fear, and extreme grief. Her haunted eyes, and shaking hands are evident in the camera shots

throughout the film, and demonstrate her intense psychological suffering. The screenplay explicitly highlights her nightmares and isolation as she lies numb in an abandoned house recollecting the effects of the conflict in her life.

3.6. IMAGERY AND SYMBOL

Although the symbolism in Jwlwi: The Seed is very subtle, it is apparent in its themes of growth and continuedness. The title "The Seed" by itself is suggestive of rebirth and so one may interpret the film's finale - with a young group singing in an upbeat way - as the new seed of hope growing. As stated previously, the film's story is of hope lost and found through perseverance and this theme is reinforced through the visual elements of the film. In addition to Jwlwi: The Seed, the film Dau Huduni Methai contains much symbolic imagery. The most obvious of these images are the horned owls (Hudu) which are part of Bodo folklore; they are the spirits of men who have been wronged in their lifetime returning to earth as the owls crying out from the trees. The horned owl image recurs throughout the film when Raimali encounters memories of his past; at those times, the horned owl represents both the lingering spirit of the deceased person as well as a spiritual promise of either reunification with the deceased or justice. In the same manner as the mythological aspect of the film was tied into the historical event in the film, the owl serves as a metaphor for the voice of history that will not be silenced.

4. DISCUSSION

As three Bodo-language films — Jwlwi: The Seed (2019), Gorai Phakhri Swans (2023), and Dau Huduni Methai (2023) — represent Assam's years of insurgency through the eyes of women, they contribute to a larger trend described by memory scholars: cinema can be considered as a "repository of cultural memory" and play an active role in how traumatic events are perceived over time between generations Kuhn et al. (2017). Memory is not created as an objective record of historical events. Rather, it is socially constructed and feminist theorists have argued that women's experiences of historical events are often re-constructed through women's narratives into new collective histories, by providing insight into experiences excluded from dominant narratives Llanos (2024), Sun (2025). Thus the Bodo language films may also be seen as examples of feminist "memory work": they document women's experience of living through conflict and provide a voice to women's "maternal bonds, relational trauma [and] the female gaze," that are excluded from traditional histories of war Sun (2025). For example, in Jwlwi: The Seed, Alaari, the widowed mother, is the central figure around whom the plot is formed and her lived memory of losing her husband and son to political violence provides the context for the film's perspective. Similarly, Gorai Phakhri presents the viewer with the stories of three Bodo women and girls, while Dau Huduni Methai presents Raimali, a victim, who recounts her rape during the insurgency and frames the entire film. By placing the women at the center of the narrative, the films present gender as "a constituent element of how...the historical memory is recorded and passed down." The films are therefore a feminist counter-narrative where women are no longer silent victims but instead are the primary authors of their own past Kim (2011), Sun (2025).

In addition, this framing of women is consistent with feminist film theory's emphasis on the importance of representation. Unlike traditional war films that usually either marginalize or eroticize the female characters, the Bodo films place the women as actors and as the storytellers. According to Llanos (2024), feminist filmmaking can act as "an archive of women's lives and voices," in order to highlight how gender influences how we remember and create memories. For example, in Jwlwi: The Seed, the camera is used to visually demonstrate Alaari's strength and resourcefulness through her daily activities (e.g., her farming, weaving, and care for her son). Additionally, in Gorai Phakri, Malothi challenges patriarchal authority by walking out of her husband's house after he labels her as "impure" due to the fact that she has been raped by the armed forces. Instead of telling her story through a third person narrator, in Dau Huduni Methai, Raimali actually tells her own story and therefore represents what feminist media scholars refer to as the "female gaze," a way of telling a story through the subjective lens of a woman and emphasizing a woman's ability to resist and survive rather than her objectification as a sexualized object for men Sun (2025). As Sun (2025) notes in her work on Holocaust memoirs, women "re-enter public discourse not as passive witnesses but as critical agents of historical disruption". The Bodo films similarly portray their female protagonists as active agents; making decisions, taking risks and importantly, telling the story.

All three films demonstrate the gendered nature of trauma in insurgency. Research on trauma studies demonstrates that women's sufferings during wartime frequently go unreported and/or are relegated to the periphery of the story Kim (2011). Kim describes traditional war films' ability to make "women's traumas invisible and unrepresentable in public

discourse" Kim (2011), unless an alternate perspective is provided. In contrast, the Bodo films provide an alternate perspective by making women's experiences central to the films' narrative. The films depict Raimali's rape by insurgents in Dau Huduni Methai and Malothi's gang-rape by soldiers in Gorai Phakri; both of which include scenes of Raimali/Malothi's subsequent trauma and the ostracism she suffers from her husband after being raped. Research on trauma studies has demonstrated that providing survivors of traumatic experiences a way to express their pain is important for healing Sun (2025), Caruth (1996); accordingly, the films provide Raimali and Malothi with a narrative voice to tell their own stories as opposed to having male characters tell their stories for them.

Research on memory emphasizes that stories contribute to how societies remember conflict, through metaphors and symbolism. Both films use cultural imagery to symbolize trauma. The title of the first film, Dau Huduni Methai, comes from a Bodo myth about a ghost owl whose call heralds tragedy; when Raimali chants the owl-song, it encodes her personal grief within a larger, collective/ancestral framework. The second film uses the metaphor of seeds throughout the film. Alaari refers to her dead son's child as "the seed," illustrating that while memory of loss may be present in a cycle of birth and death, there is still hope for the future. Memory theorists Kuhn et al. (2017) remind us that these types of cultural symbols used in film act as mnemonics, allowing audiences to emotionally associate with historical events. Additionally, Llanos (2024) pointed out that feminist documentary filmmakers deliberately archive women's memories over multiple generations. In like manner, the two films preserve a woman's testimony as a testament to what could be forgotten, as well as to the women's right to testify. As such, all of the films use non-linear storytelling (flashback, voice-over recall) to simulate the process of memory. For example, Jwlwi occurs in the year 2015 but includes numerous flashbacks to the past period of the insurgency, much like Alaari cannot distinguish between her current experience and past traumatic experiences. The cinematic structure of the films, in relation to trauma theory, illustrates that memories of traumatic experiences are frequently recalled in fragmented pieces at different times Caruth (1996). By prioritizing the women's perspectives in the flashbacks in these films, the films are challenging official histories that have minimized the voices of Bodo women.

5. CONCLUSION

Bodo language films portraying this decades-long conflict, have radically rewritten Assam's collective memory centered on women's stories. Historically, women have been marginalized in conflict accounts Jacobs (2008), and by contrast, the Bodo-language films provide women with protagonist roles and narrator roles to ensure that the movement's story is "not a one-sided tale of militancy," but includes "the hearts that endured." All three films illustrate how film provides an opportunity for reframing collective memory through the lens of gender. Through their use of female protagonists as witnesses and survivors, they develop alternative archival sites of Assam's insurgency that prevent erasure Kuhn et al. (2017), Llanos (2024). Each film situates traumatic events within the lived experience of women: whether a mother's diary, a daughter's diary or a rape survivor's song -- thereby "highlighting" aspects of history which have traditionally remained outside of public memory Kim (2011), Sun (2025). The Bodo-language films reflect the notion of feminist film studies which emphasize the agency of women filmmakers: the protagonists are not simply subjects of violence, but also insistent on having their voices heard Sun (2025). The inclusion of culturally-specific symbols (mythical owls, seeds) and the use of personal domestic spaces within their narratives allow the Bodo-language films to render Assam's insurgency as rich and complex a collective memory as possible. Thus, the Bodo-language films counter male-centric histories of war and illustrate how film can function as feminist memory work: not only changing what is remembered, but how it is remembered Llanos (2024), Sun (2025). Ultimately, the Bodo-language films demonstrate the ethical and artistic imperative to represent women's voices as central to the telling of trauma and reinforce that in the politics of memory, gender is "more than just a minor category of difference, but a fundamental force" Sun (2025).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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