

## Landscape and Body as Sites of Trauma in Hijam Guno's Khudol

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### Abstract

The paper investigates the embodiment of trauma in both the landscape and the human body in Hijam Guno's *Khudol*, one of the significant Manipuri literary representations of the civilian experience of the Second World War (WWII) in Manipur. Despite the Battle of Imphal being one of the deadliest episodes of WWII in South Asia, scholarly attention to Manipuri civilian experiences remains limited. Through a close reading of *Khudol* and drawing on trauma theories by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Herman, the study examines how the novel conveys the psychological and corporeal aftermath of war. The scarred and depopulated landscape becomes a site of collective memory, while the protagonist's disfigured body embodies the lingering effects of trauma. By foregrounding regional wartime experiences, the paper positions Manipuri narratives as vital counterpoints to dominant military and colonial histories, demonstrating how *Khudol* preserves and reimagines the traumatic legacy of WWII through its portrayal of wounded bodies and devastated terrains.

**Keywords:** World War II in Manipur; *Khudol*; trauma studies; cultural memory; civilian war narratives; bodily trauma

### Introduction

The Second World War in India, fought in the northeastern states of present-day Manipur and Nagaland, is a landmark event in the socio-political history of modern India. In particular, the Battle of Imphal during the Second World War (WWII) had a profound traumatic impact on the people due to the sheer scale and intensity of the conflict in Manipur. The war influenced the collective nationalist movement of independent India. It witnessed one of the largest mass exoduses in the history of WWII. The deployment of modern weaponry, psychological warfare, propaganda, and multiple forms of exploitation left a lasting imprint of shock and terror on the collective memory of the people. Stories of survival amid disease, starvation, and the constant threat of violence remain some of the most powerful recollections preserved by local survivors of the war.

Despite the significance of the war in the socio-cultural history of India, there is limited scholarship on the literary representations of civilian perspectives of the conflict. Existing studies tend to focus either on the military dimensions of the war, the nationalist activities of the INA in Manipur, or the broader socio-political implications of the conflict, with little attention to the lived experiences of local people. Civilian Manipuri perspectives remain underexplored, partly due to issues of accessibility, as many recollections are written in the regional Manipuri language and therefore remain outside global academic discourse. However, given the importance of survivors' memories in the broader field of WWII memory studies, the local Manipuri experiences of the war need attention and study.

This paper seeks to shed light on an important aspect of the war- its impact on the collective psyche of civilians by examining one of the key literary works representing Manipuri wartime experiences. Hijam Guno's novel *Khudol* reflects the collective traumatic fallout of the war through its portrayal of survivors and the war-ravaged landscape of Manipur. A study of *Khudol* offers distinct insights into how Manipuri society remembers and processes the traumatic memories of WWII in the region.

Hijam Guno's novel *Khudol*, published in 1964, is a historical fiction rooted in the social and political realities of the Second World War. It captures the complex and lingering effects of wartime trauma through the lives and experiences of individuals affected by the conflict. Survivors who were physically disfigured and displaced carry the collective memory of struggle. The novel memorializes the trauma of WWII through its vivid depictions of the scarred landscape and the disfigured human body.

The study draws insights from key trauma theorists and psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Herman. Their theorizations of trauma, particularly its interconnectedness with bodily harm, enable a reading of *Khudol* through a Western-centric trauma framework.

The study highlights the significance of Manipuri war narratives within the broader memory of WWII. The relevance of regional memory retold from the perspectives of civilians offers a counter-narrative to dominant historical, official, military, or colonial accounts. By introducing these lesser-known narratives, it draws attention to the importance of Northeast India in global WWII studies. Most importantly, it demonstrates how the collective traumatic memory of the war is deeply embedded in local cultural memory.

The paper is organized into six sections. The first section offers a concise contextual background of the Second World War in Manipur. The second section provides a critical review of existing literature on WWII in the region. The third section outlines the theoretical framework on trauma, while the fourth details the methodological approach adopted for the study. The fifth section presents the discussion and analysis, and the final section concludes the paper with key insights and implications.

### **Contextual Background**

The Second World War in Manipur began on May 10, 1942, with the first Japanese bombing of Imphal. Two years later, the war intensified into one of the most devastating battles, known as the Battle of Imphal (1944). The Battle of Imphal took place in various parts of Manipur from March 8 to July 1, 1944.

Few places in India felt the impact of WWII as profoundly as Northeast India, especially Manipur. The memory of the war remains deeply embedded in the region's cultural and political consciousness. Owing to the scale and geographical reach of the conflict over four years, "almost everyone was affected by the war in some way, directly or indirectly" (Katoch and Kangjam 245). The war:

...brought rapid but profound changes in the consciousness as well as the socio-economic life of the people. These changes not only paved the way for the emergence of new social forces

but also prepared the necessary pre-conditions for a strong popular movement for bringing about broad economic and political changes in Manipur during the immediate post-Second World War period (N. L. Singh 1-31).

The Battle of Imphal In Manipur along with the Battle of Kohima in Nagaland were one of the fiercest battles of WWII which were decisive for both the Allies and the Japanese in the Burma Campaign (Evans and Brett-James) (Katoch). The battles were ranked as “Britain’s Greatest Battles” in a 2013 poll conducted by the National Army Museum. They are also marked as Japan’s “greatest defeat on land” (Evans and Brett-James xi).

### **Literature Survey**

Second World War has generated extensive literary, historical, and journalistic accounts across the world. A wide range of narratives- including Holocaust literature, testimonies of atomic bomb survivors, memoirs, and fiction- captures the traumatic experiences of the war. However, literature exploring the experiences of WWII in India remains comparatively scarce. A few English-language works, such as Yvonne Vaz Yazdani’s memoir collection *New Songs of Survivors* (2016), Debendranath Acharya’s novel *Jangam* (2018), and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2000), shed light on the plight of Burmese-Indian refugees during the 1942 exodus and their movement into Northeast India.

From the northeastern region, significant WWII-related literature includes Easterine Kire’s *Mari* (2010), which recounts the experiences of local people in Nagaland, and her later novel *A Respectable Woman* (2019), which briefly references the war. Assamese literature has also produced notable works dealing with the wartime context, such as Jogesh Das’s *Dawar Aru Nai* (1955), Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya’s *Yaruyingam* (1960), Nirupama Borgohain’s *Xei Nodi Nirobodhi* (1963), and Jyotiprasad Agarwala’s play *Lobhita* (1942). Despite their historical relevance, none of these works address the events or experiences of WWII in Manipur.

In this absence, regional Manipuri literature emerges as the primary source offering detailed accounts of WWII in Manipur. Several fictional and non-fictional narratives document the civilian experiences of the war. Khurajam Nimaicharan’s memoir *The Second World War in Manipur and My Childhood* recounts a child’s experience of both joyful and tragic moments during the conflict. Other memoirs—such as Jamini Devi’s *Tirtha Yatra*, Naorembam Samungou’s *Tabunungda Yenglubada*, and Thoibi Devi’s *Mityeng Ama*—record personal stories of survival, displacement, and social disruption. Kangjam Yaiphaba’s collection of personal testimonies, *Forgotten Voices of the Japan Laan*, further contributes to the collective memory of the war. Novels such as Thiyam Indrakumar’s *Aonba Samaj* and Hijam Guno’s *Aroiba Paodam* and *Khudol* also serve as important repositories of WWII memory in the Manipuri language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study draws from psychoanalytic perspectives articulated by Sigmund Freud, alongside critical trauma theories advocated by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman to delve into the complex nature of trauma.

Sigmund Freud's understanding of neurosis and the development of traumatic symptoms, caused by excitations from an external event that disturb or damage consciousness, is applied here to read war-affected individuals whose cognition has been impaired. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud argues that the breach of the "protective shield," or the psychological defence mechanism, by a strong external stimulus disrupts an individual's inner psyche, sense of self, and ego, thereby giving rise to neurosis or traumatic symptoms. His formulation that the original traumatic event does not inherently produce trauma; rather, trauma emerges through the subsequent reenactment of the event, is crucial in understanding how trauma forms. In his essay "Project for a Scientific Psychology," Freud further emphasizes that repeated recall of memories generates traumatic experience. As he notes, "We invariably find that memory is repressed, which has only become a trauma by deferred action" (Strachey 356). The reenactment of the event—often after a period of latency—thus results in the manifestation of traumatic symptoms.

Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma also follows Freud's understanding that trauma is a reaction to "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). She emphasizes the belated nature and the incomprehensible nature of trauma. As she puts it, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past; but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 7). Her understanding of trauma helps read gaps, and silences and the unspoken in literature as signs of trauma.

Another psychologist, Judith Herman, highlights how individuals suffering from trauma often come to associate themselves with a sense of a "damaged self." In her influential work *Trauma and Recovery*, she establishes a connection between traumatic processes and bodily identity. Her insight that trauma survivors experience a fractured sense of self and a diminished sense of autonomy over their own bodies is crucial for understanding the link between trauma and bodily identity.

### **Methodology**

The paper employs in-depth interpretive textual analysis of *Khudol* to examine the underlying modes of trauma representation embedded in the narrative. Drawing on trauma studies—particularly psychoanalytic approaches—it analyses how trauma is articulated through the depiction of the human body and the wartime landscape. The textual reading is supplemented by secondary empirical studies on the Second World War in Manipur, which provide historical grounding and contextual support.

All textual extracts from *Khudol* cited in this paper are translated by the scholar from the original Manipuri. Care has been taken to ensure that the nuances, cultural expressions, and emotional resonance of the Manipuri language are faithfully conveyed in the English translations.

## Discussion and Analysis

The Second World War in Manipur stands as one of the deadliest military confrontations in WWII history. It has been described by various names—such as the “Stalingrad of the East” (Ritter 123), “Britain’s Greatest Battle,” and a “blood-curdling campaign” (NHK Broadcasting 2018, quoted in Murayama 225)—all of which underscore the immense scale of devastation and violence. The severity of the Battle of Imphal is reflected in the heavy military casualties on both sides. The Japanese forces suffered approximately 30,502 deaths and 23,003 injuries while the Allied forces recorded 16,667 dead and injured (Kirby 526–527). These figures also gesture toward the indirect tragedy borne by civilians, who experienced the war’s catastrophic scale of violence and disruption.

Violent events such as war reshape not only the physical environment but also the collective psyche of a community. The episodes of WWII in Manipur brought extensive destruction to resources and infrastructure and profoundly affected civilian life. The soldiers’ use of intimidation, threats, punishments, and propaganda left deep psychological scars, instilling lasting fear among the people.

Hijam Guno’s novel *Khudol* [Gift] reimagines the violence and tragedy involved in the war through its portrayal of lives of common civilians. Set against the backdrop of the war, the novel captures the journey of the psychologically estranged protagonist Gokul, who was left physically disabled in a bombing incident in Imphal during WWII in Manipur. The novel traces his transformation from a gullible youth to someone traumatized by his physical disability. Guno weaves the characters’ stories of growth through the unavoidable circumstances of wartime Manipur’s social reality. Social perceptions of disability, patriarchal views of women, and the dynamics of relationships shape the novel into a realistic portrayal of wartime Manipur.

*Khudol* reimagines the impact of war-time violence through the depiction of physical changes such as bodily disfigurement and the destruction of the surrounding landscape, and the changing psyche of individuals affected by the violence. The portrayal of the landscape of Imphal after the bombings, for instance, captures the devastating impact of the violence. The altered landscape carries the memory of the collective wound inflicted by the war. The landscape reflects the pain, agony, and helplessness of the victims. A particular line from the novel reads: “Once free from suffering, Meitei land (Manipur) becomes a hot battlefield. Tales of suffering spread in all four directions... Places in Imphal look deserted. Not even birds are seen. Even though houses stand, it is no different from a silent forest” (Guno 105-6). The landscape affected by bombings transforming into an inhospitable terrain captures the immensity of the violence and the collective agony that followed the war. In this sense, the imagination of landscape in war narratives serves as an important memory marker keeping alive the memory of various episodes of the war.

Paul Fussell, in his study of First World War trench literature, observes that war unfolds “always within nature” (Fussell 231). Frances Houghton, writing on WWII veterans’ memoirs, similarly argues that the “natural environment is constructed as a medium through which the veteran and his interpretations of war were shaped” (Houghton 71). In war literature and cultural memory, the landscape thus becomes a symbolic surface onto which psychological

experiences are projected. It is infused with emotion as a way of interpreting the battleground and envisioning the conflict, linking it closely to both individual and collective psyches. In *Khudol*, the depicted landscape reflects the lived realities of war, acting as a mirror to the suffering of the writer and the community. It becomes a crucial medium through which traumatic memories of the human mind are expressed.

*Khudol*'s vivid imagery helps reconstruct the historical memory of the war. Two important episodes marking the beginning of the war in Manipur are the influx of Burmese Indian refugees from Burma and the simultaneous Japanese bombings of Imphal, which led to the exodus of its inhabitants. These incidents are fictionalized with detailed and evocative imagery. The novel reads:

Imphal City has undergone a significant change. Every corner is now filled with huts providing shelter to refugees from Burma. Military vehicles, which were never seen before, now occupy every road, leading to congestion in movement. The refugees reaching Nityapat are taking separate paths, with some heading toward Dimapur and others toward Cachar. These displaced individuals have endured days of struggle, crossing long mountain ranges without food or sleep. Many of them break into tears upon learning they must continue walking on the Cachar road again. Those who cannot continue on foot collapse along the way, lying like lifeless logs. Witnessing such scenes is unimaginable and deeply painful. This is why war is described as the "Horror of all horrors, gravest of all crimes (Guno 102-103).

*Khudol* also reproduces the aftermath of the bombings and their effects on civilians, including the narrator, in the following manner:

Sounds of agony arising from death and separation filled in all directions. Everyone scattered in all directions. My mother, too, was among them. Everyone was at a loss, not knowing where the bomb fell and who was hurt. Our father asked us to pack our things. Our family left Imphal with whatever we could carry and moved down southwards to Moirang and found refuge in Metiram (Guno 103).

Both the refugees and the Manipuri civilians endured comparable tragedies during the war, and the novel portrays this shared struggle and suffering. The collective trauma depicted extends across the entire population. As the narrator reflects, "While on the way, I see endless lines of men walking and running. Those refugees from Burma that I saw earlier came back to my mind. I feel their suffering now" (Guno 103).

The depiction of the landscape reflects the fractured collective psyche of the war-ravaged community, while the disfigured body deepens the exploration of trauma's effects. In *Khudol*, violence inflicted on the body reveals the intimate, lived dimensions of traumatic experience, shown most vividly through the protagonist's disability. A bombing in Imphal during WWII leaves Gokul partially paralyzed on his left side, marking a decisive shift in his life and perception of the world. His disability and scarred skin become inseparable from his physical identity. Gokul's response to seeing his body after surgery underscores the profound impact of the explosion and the lasting burden it imposes. Gokul narrates:



Next is my left leg, but it looks shorter. Even when I try to stretch it, it is not the same as my right leg. My eyes and hands may have scars, but I can still use them. But what about my leg? Will it be rendered helpless for the rest of my life? I'm disabled; I will have to limp or hop. The terror overwhelms me, my hair stands on end, and I feel dizzy. I cannot hold back my emotions any longer, and I shout in desperation, I do not want to live; kill me! (Guno 116).

Gokul's recognition of his disability evokes overwhelming fear, shock, and denial. As Barnes and Mercer note, the shock experienced by individuals upon confronting their disabled condition often arises from a cycle of denial and despair over the possibility of recovery, which may lead to anger toward others and eventually to depression as a precursor to accepting their altered circumstances (Barnes and Mercer 22). Gokul's terror and refusal to accept his condition can also be understood through Sigmund Freud's framework, which interprets such responses as the collapse of psychological defense mechanisms. This collapse disrupts cognitive functioning, destabilizes one's sense of self, and fractures ego identity (Freud).

A fractured identity shaped by a disfigured body can severely undermine an individual's psychological well-being. In *Khudol*, the protagonist's attempts to rebuild a stable sense of self repeatedly falter. The traumatic memory of the bombing, combined with the burden of living in a disfigured body, continually haunts him. His inability to adjust to or accept this altered reality fuels the persistent return of overwhelming memories. As he remains bound to this fragmented identity, traumatic experiences resurface involuntarily through flashbacks, nightmares, and repeated reenactments of the past.

Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma unfolds through a process of "repetitive seeing," manifested as "hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" long after the event has passed (Caruth 11, 91–92). Revisiting the experience becomes a psychological act in which "the subject acts as if the original traumatic situations are still in existence and engages in protective devices which failed in the original occasion" (Van der Kolk et al. 58). Such reenactment reflects an intense mental effort to revise or master the traumatic memory. In *Khudol*, this cycle of intrusive recall captures the protagonist's ongoing struggle following the disfigurement of his body.

Thus, analysing violence inflicted on the body becomes essential to understanding trauma narratives. In *Khudol*, the protagonist's physical disfigurement becomes a crucial lens through which his troubled inner world is revealed. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, explains that trauma generates a sense of a "damaged self," marking a rupture in one's "bodily integrity." Such experiences produce a loss of control over one's body and a fragmented sense of identity—both of which become integral to the survivor's psychological reality. She writes:

Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, and defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost. In the folklore of combat and rape, this loss of control is often recounted as the most humiliating aspect of the trauma (Herman 52-53).

The body becomes a central site for examining violence and trauma in war literature. Hijam Irabot's poem *Imagi Puja [Mother's Worship]* echoes this concern, reflecting on the brutal impact of WWII in Manipur by foregrounding the bodies of women and children. In both its

imagery and thematic emphasis, the poem underscores how the body functions as a crucial locus for representing wartime violence and its traumatic consequences. The poem reads:

Chest of babies/Becomes the target of  
Armies' bayonets.  
The sharpness of swords/The piercing tips of bayonets  
Are tested on women's bodies (Irabot 72).

Trauma narratives such as *Khudol* portray psychological suffering through representations of injured bodies. In the novel, both the devastated landscape and the wounded characters serve as powerful expressions of the collective psychological trauma endured by the community.

### Conclusion

Hijam Guno's *Khudol* serves as an important recollection of the traumatic memory of the Second World War in Manipur. The novel retells experiences of displacement, bombings, and hardship through the perspectives of civilians. Through the protagonist and the war-ravaged landscape, the narrative reflects the long-term effects of trauma. Trauma embedded in both the human body and the physical environment demonstrates its pervasive impact on the collective memory of the Manipuri people.

Reading the text through trauma theories shows how individual suffering reveals broader collective experiences. The study of this often-neglected war narrative from Manipur highlights the significance of civilian voices in offering a counter-narrative to dominant colonial or military histories. The novel preserves the perspectives of civilians whose lives and cultural practices were disrupted by the war. Their lived reality, as depicted in the text, memorializes local memories and situates Manipur's history within wider discussions of global WWII memory.

Overall, *Khudol* illustrates the distinct ways in which trauma and memory of the war are recorded and understood in a regional context. The text provides insight into the social and cultural modes through which trauma is experienced and remembered, thereby contributing to the cultural memory of the war.

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