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The Unconcluded Grief: Trauma, Temporality, and Resilience in Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi's "He's Still Alive"

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Abstract: This paper analyses Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi's short story "He's Still Alive" as a profound study of unconcluded grief within the socio-political landscape of Manipur. It argues that the story's fragmented temporality and cyclical narrative structure formally enact the protagonist's experience of ambiguous loss, a state of psychological limbo that freezes the grieving process. Reading the son's disappearance through Giorgio Agamben's concept of the state of exception, the analysis situates the personal trauma within a political context where individuals are reduced to "bare life," their existence suspended by an unaccountable sovereign power. The spaces of the home and the keithel (market) are examined as geographies of both female resilience and structural violence. The paper concludes that the story functions as a quiet but powerful testimony, bearing witness to the enduring psychological trauma inflicted by political conflict and resisting the politics of forgetting that often accompanies it.

Keywords: Ambiguous Loss, State of Exception, Bare Life, Trauma, Temporality, Manipuri literature.

Introduction

The phenomenon of enforced human disappearances in the Indian state of Manipur is intricately tied to the state's protracted insurgency, counter insurgency operations and imposition of laws such as Armed Forces Special Powers Act. These incidents have led to widespread allegations of human rights violations, arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances (Singh 113, Human Rights Watch). These disappearances often occur in the absence of due legal process leaving many of the cases unresolved and creating a culture of



fear, injustice and trauma to the affected communities (Amnesty International). Literary productions from such political climate, directly or indirectly, register the historically unregistered psychological experience of the affected people.

Bimabati Thiyam Ongbi's short story "He's Still Alive" (translated from Meiteilon by Thingnam Anjulika) presents a straightforward narrative to articulate a powerful political critique. The story centers on Thamcha, a widowed mother who maintains her daily watch for a son who disappeared without explanation years earlier. While seemingly a minimalist account of personal loss, the story transcends its domestic focus to offer a nuanced meditation on the phenomenon of 'ambiguous loss' and the enduring psychological trauma produced by the protracted political conflicts in Manipur that has made human disappearance normal. The story's power is principally constituted through its strategic formal and thematic choices, particularly its refusal to name the agents of violence explicitly, whether state or non-state actors. This narrative silence functions not as an omission but as a sophisticated rhetorical strategy, portraying a society where disappearances have become so thoroughly normalized that their causation exists as an unspoken, assumed reality woven into the very fabric of everyday life.

Through its deployment of fragmented temporality, symbolism drawn from the mundane, and a focus on the protagonist's internal consciousness, the story mounts a subtle yet devastating critique of the human cost of political violence. It exposes how the most profound injury inflicted by such conflicts is not necessarily death itself, but rather the torturous uncertainty that suspends the grieving process, trapping individuals and communities in a liminal space between hope and despair. This psychological suspension constitutes a distinct form of political violence, one that operates through absence and erasure rather than direct confrontation. The son's disappearance reduces him to what might be understood as what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life', a form of existence stripped of political identity and legal protection, where a person can be removed from the civic order without a trace or any consequence (8-9). This erasure extends beyond the individual to envelop the family in a state of perpetual uncertainty, where traditional rituals of mourning become impossible.



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This paper examines how the story constructs a poetics of waiting through its fractured narrative structure and Thamcha's ritualised existence, framing her experience through the psychological framework of ambiguous loss. It further situates the narrative within its specific socio-political context, interpreting the *keithel* (market) and the home as charged geographies where personal trauma intersects with collective historical experience. These spaces operate as sites of both resilience and violence, where the mundane rhythms of daily life persistently confront the invisible but omnipresent machinery of political oppression. Finally, it contends, by synthesising these elements, that the story's power derives from its capacity to bear witness to forms of suffering that often remain unspoken - the silent anguish that characterises existence within what can only be termed a perpetual 'state of exception'. Through its focus on Thamcha's psychological landscape, the story illuminates how political violence permeates the most private spheres of human experience, transforming ordinary life into a continuous state of vigilance and unresolved mourning.

The Poetics of Waiting: Temporality and Ambiguous Loss

The structural and psychological core of the story is built upon the phenomenology of waiting in the face of an unresolved loss. The narrative deliberately eschews a linear progression, instead mirroring the protagonist's own fractured consciousness, which perpetually oscillates between a mundane present, a traumatic past, and an endlessly deferred future. This deliberate temporal fragmentation serves as the primary formal mechanism through which the story explores the complex psychological state of its protagonist. The story opens in the present tense, grounding the reader immediately in Thamcha's relentless, cyclical routine: "It's still dark when Thamcha gets up, takes a bath, makes the viashnavite mark on her nose and forehead... and goes to the keithel to sell vegetables" (99). This daily ritual is not merely a means of economic survival, "Otherwise you and I will die of starvation" (100), but can be read as a desperate, performative attempt to impose a semblance of order on a life rendered existentially meaningless by a singular, cataclysmic event. Her actions are mechanical, almost liturgical, a performance of normalcy that thinly masks an inner world utterly consumed by a single, looping question: "Will he come?" (100).



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This pervasive condition is most productively understood through the lens of ambiguous loss, a concept developed by family therapist Pauline Boss. Boss defines it as a loss that remains unclear, lacking official verification or resolution, which in turn ‘freezes the grieve process’ (11). The lost person is physically absent but psychologically present, a paradox that leaves the family system in a state of perpetual limbo, unable to complete the work of mourning. Thamcha’s son has vanished into this very void of uncertainty, leaving behind a complete absence of narrative. There was no precipitating argument, no witnessed departure, and most critically, no body. The text underscores this utter lack of information: “Not a single person had seen him, no one knew anything or had gone out with him” (100). This erasure of evidence denies Thamcha the closure afforded by social rituals like a funeral, ceremonies that provide a framework for processing grief and eventually integrating it. Her son exists in a liminal state, suspended between categories, neither definitively alive nor certifiably dead. Consequently, Thamcha herself is psychologically trapped. She can neither fully mourn, nor can she relinquish hope. Her entire life becomes a testament to this unbearable ambiguity, a constant and exhausting vigil.

The story’s narrative structure reflects this psychological entrapment. The prose seamlessly shifts from the immediate present at the *keithel*, “she is soon seated in the market as usual, hawking her wares” (99). Brooding to an internal, timeless, and ultimately unanswerable question: “How long has it been since she started coming out to the keithel?” (99). This query transcends a simple marking of time; it is a profound expression of a life arrested, of temporal flow severed. The timeline of her existence is now irrevocably cleaved into two distinct eras: the peaceful life when he was present/alive and the endless, monotonous ‘now’ of his absence. The narrative then plunges into a detailed flashback of the night of his disappearance, a memory that is clearly etched into her consciousness and replayed in an endless loop. The dialogue here is stark and charged with a rising, helpless panic: “Where’s your brother?”, “Why? Even the sun has set”, culminating in the stark report that “Not a single person had seen him” (100). The passage of objective, chronological time following the event is then compressed into a single, devastating sentence: “Days passed into months, months turned to years” (100). This narrative strategy of compression emphasizes how, for Thamcha’s subjective experience, the intervening years have been a homogenous blur of waiting, utterly



devoid of new milestones or meaningful change. Her son's absence has created a temporal void that has effectively swallowed her own life and story.

This narrative fragmentation does more than mirror an individual psyche; it formally replicates the collective trauma of a community subjected to repeated and unexplained disappearances. The personal becomes political not through explicit commentary but through this very aesthetic of rupture and the state of being unresolved, making the reader experience the same disorientation and lack of closure that defines Thamcha's world.

The story's climax and conclusion further reinforce this theme of frozen time and unconcluded grief; the sudden, heart-stopping moment at the market when she thinks she sees him, "That - who was that? Was it ...?" (101), is a cruel trick of a mind conditioned by desperate hope. Her frantic chase through the crowd is a physical manifestation of her psychological state: a futile, grasping search for a ghost, an attempt to materialise a memory. Her subsequent return home does not bring resolution, only a deeper descent into the cyclical torment of hope and despair. The final scene stands as the most poignant illustration of ambiguous loss's brutal architecture. Awakened by a sound she believes to be her son knocking, she runs out and opens the door, her hope rendered in a visceral, immediate physical response. But the doorway remains empty, a tangible symbol of absence. The crushing realization that it was an auditory hallucination, a phantom generated by her own profound desire, leads to the story's powerful final image of stasis and despair: "Leaning against the door, slowly she slides down to the floor. Tears stream from her eyes even as darkness and light are busy exchanging duties" (102). The threshold of the door becomes a potent symbol for her own liminal state, caught between inside and outside, hope and reality, past and present. The final image of the twilight, the transition 'between darkness and light,' perfectly mirrors her own existence, perpetually trapped in a twilight of uncertainty where dawn never truly breaks. The title, "He's Still Alive," is thus critically revealed not as a statement of empirical fact, but as the central, necessary mantra of her psychological survival, a vital fiction she must continually reaffirm to endure an unbearable reality that steadfastly offers no answers. This insistence on his aliveness, however painful, becomes a form of resistance against the ultimate



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erasure that a confirmed death would represent, highlighting the complex ways in which hope itself can be both a torture and a lifeline, a private language of defiance against a public silence.

The Market and the State: Geographies of Resilience and Violence

While the story is intensely focused on Thamcha's personal psychology, it remains deeply embedded within a specific socio-political geography that fundamentally shapes the conditions of her existence. The setting is far from incidental; the spaces of the *keithel* and the home function as culturally and politically charged arenas where female resilience confronts the invisible but omnipresent violence of the state. The story's explicit mention of the "*Khwairamband bazaar*" the main marketplace in the heart of Imphal where only women vendors do business (101), serves as a crucial geographical and political anchor. This reference situates the story squarely within the historic *Ima Keithel* (Mother's Market), a centuries-old institution run exclusively by women that represents both economic agency and socio-political mobilization in Manipuri society. For Thamcha, the *keithel* operates on multiple levels: it is both a pragmatic space of economic survival where she must eke out a living for herself and her daughter and a symbolic space where personal tragedy intersects with collective experience.

The market further functions as a site of implicit solidarity and collective support; when Thamcha abruptly rushes off in pursuit of the figure she believes is her son, her instinctive gesture to entrust her belongings to the woman next to her, "Tombi,... please look after my things" (101), reveals an underlying network of mutual dependence among the women vendors. This representation resonates with the historical role of Manipuri women, particularly those associated with *Ima Keithel*, who have consistently organized against political oppression, from the *Nupi Lan* (Women's War in 1939) against British colonial policies to contemporary movements challenging state violence (Khuraijam 210-212).

The story's political critique achieves its greatest potency through its strategic silences. The son's disappearance is presented deliberately as a domestic mystery, a personal tragedy seemingly devoid of explicit political cause. When her daughter asks, "Ima, what unfulfilled wishes could Dada [elder brother] have had?" (100), Thamcha deflects toward personal failing rather than political context, focusing on his perceived inconsiderateness. When her daughter suggests they should have searched for him, Thamcha's response, "Where do we search? Not one of his friends says they went out together. It's also not as if he's been captured



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or taken away” (100), is laden with a weary resignation that speaks volumes about the normalized climate of fear and powerlessness. The final clause operates with deep irony; while she verbally dismisses the possibility, its very articulation points directly toward the well-documented reality of enforced disappearances in the region. The story’s refusal to name perpetrators constitutes a powerful literary strategy that mirrors a social world where the sources of violence are so pervasive and unaccountable that they become atmospheric, an unspoken fact of daily life. The violence is, thus, structural; it is not an event with a clear agent, but a constant possibility that can rupture a life at any moment. Such a reality operates within what can be understood as a permanent state of what Giorgio Agamben identifies as a ‘state of exception’ (17), a space where sovereign power suspends the normal rule of law, thereby reducing individuals to what he terms *homo sacer* or “bare life,” a form of existence that can be taken or erased without legal consequence (63). In such a state, the normal rule of law is suspended, and individuals can be stripped of their legal and political rights which reduce them to a life that can be taken or erased without legal consequence.

Thamcha’s son has vanished into such an exceptional space. His removal from the civic order is so complete that he leaves no trace, existing in a liminal state between life and death, presence and absence. He is neither a citizen with rights nor a corpse to be mourned through traditional rituals. This reduction to bare life generates the devastating ambiguity that traps his family in perpetual grief. The state’s power manifests not merely in the capacity to kill, but in the juridical authority to suspend the very categories of life and death, thereby inflicting a distinctive form of psychological torture on those left behind, who cannot complete the process of mourning.

The story therefore functions as a subtle yet searing indictment of the political system that produces such conditions. The withered vegetables in Thamcha’s basket, which no one bought because they were “not at all fresh” (101), serves as a potent metaphor for her own existence, a life that has withered under the weight of an endless and fruitless waiting. They symbolise the slow deterioration wrought by a political climate that systematically robs its citizens of vitality, hope, and futurity. Through this symbolic economy, the story portrays how daily routines are transformed into daily acts of endurance that renders the home itself a waiting room for news that may never come.



Conclusion: The Testimony of Quiet Suffering

The story, thus, intertwines the deeply personal with the profoundly political, offering not merely a story but a sophisticated critique of the mechanisms of power and grief. By avoiding overt political commentary and focusing instead on the quiet, interior world of a grieving mother, the story achieves a form of testimony that resonates beyond the individual to expose structural violence. It demonstrates how the grand-scale violence of political conflict is ultimately experienced not in headlines or statistics, but in the intimate, everyday suffering of individuals like Thamcha, whose psychological limbo becomes a microcosm of collective trauma. The story's formal brilliance lies in the synthesis of its structure and theme; the fragmented, cyclical narrative, the focus on mundane rituals, and the unresolved ending all work in concert to immerse the reader in the suffocating reality of ambiguous loss, a state of being that occupies one of the recurring and central themes in literatures from Northeast India. Such stories become a form of bearing witness, giving voice to experiences that are often silenced or marginalized by official state narratives (Choudhury et al. 14).

The analysis of the story through the frameworks of ambiguous loss and the state of exception reveals the multiple layers of violence at play. The immediate violence is the son's disappearance, but the more enduring violence is the institutional and psychological machinery that denies the family closure, trapping them in a state of suspended grief. Thamcha's struggle is a testament to human resilience; her daily trek to the *keithel* is an act of defiance, a refusal to let her family die of starvation. Yet, the story offers no easy catharsis; the final image of Thamcha crumpled at the empty doorway confirms that this resilience comes at an immense psychic cost. Her tears, falling as "darkness and light are busy exchanging duties" (102), symbolize the tears of countless "half-widows" and mothers across conflict zones, whose lives are lived in a perpetual twilight of uncertainty. This imagery not only underscores the temporal stagnation that defines her existence but also serves as a metaphor for the broader political condition where lives are suspended between visibility and erasure, hope and despair.

Ultimately, the story's title "He's Still Alive" is its most tragic element; it functions as the psychological anchor that prevents Thamcha from succumbing entirely to despair. It is a belief she must actively maintain against the crushing weight of years of silence, a necessary fiction, a shield against a truth



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too terrible to contemplate. This insistence on him being alive, however painful, becomes a form of resistance against the ultimate erasure that a confirmed death would represent, highlighting the complex ways in which hope itself can be both a torture and a lifeline. The title, thus, becomes more than just a piece of fiction; it is a vital document of human suffering and a quiet, dignified act of resistance against the politics of forgetting. It insists that we remember not only those who are lost but also those who are left behind to wait, forever caught in the echo of a door that never opens.

In this way, “He’s Still Alive” does not merely depict trauma; it formally embodies it, making the reader complicit in the very structures of knowing and not-knowing that define Thamcha’s world. The story’s unresolved ending refuses the reader the consolation of closure, thereby mirroring the lived experience of those in societies gripped by perpetual conflict. It is through this refusal that the story achieves its most powerful critique, challenging not only the political systems that produce such suffering but also the narrative conventions that often seek to tidy up the messy, enduring realities of grief. By leaving Thamcha’s story unconcluded, Ongbi insists on the urgency of remembering, witnessing, and, above all, acknowledging the silent, resilient endurance of those who survive in the shadows of exception.

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